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BUSH-LIFE IN QUEENSLAND

BUSH-LIFE IN QUEENSLAND

OR

JOHN WEST'S COLONIAL EXPERIENCES

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BY

A. C. GRANT

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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BUSH-LIFE IN QUEENSLAND.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHAPTER ON EXPLORING.

It has been mentioned that John's old friend, and Bessie's accepted lover, Charley Stone, was absent on a second exploring expedition. The experience and confidence which he had gained during his frontier life had determined him to make the next trip on a less extensive scale than the immediately preceding one, for several reasons. One of these was, that he did not care to go out again under the leadership of the chief who had had command of the former party, and who was also preparing to start; the next and most potent being that he was exceedingly anxious if possible to reach the country he had in view, and secure the pick of it before the rival expedition, which was being fitted

out with the express purpose of doing the same, could arrive there.

The previous party, of which Stone had made one, had started from the newly-formed township of Rockhampton, which was then considered the *ultima Thule* of civilisation. There were six members in all, each providing a certain number of horses, and contributing his share towards the purchase of rations sufficient to last them during the period they expected to be away. Two blackboys accompanied them — one being the boy which Stone had taken with him from Betyammo. All were well armed, and a leader was chosen whose orders the rest agreed to obey, under pain of expulsion from the expedition. It was further agreed upon, that every piece of good pasture-country they came across, suitable for a run, should be examined, and have trees marked upon it, its landmarks noted, and general description written down, in order that leases might be applied for at the Crown Lands Department; and to prevent jealousy, and allow each a fair chance, these pieces of country were to be balloted for on their return journey.

Accordingly they started, the cavalcade consisting of nearly forty horses, of which number about twenty-four were packed with flour, tea, sugar, dried beef, coffee, plums, and currants, &c., &c.; medicines, ammunition, tents, blankets, clothes, and tomahawks, and

other necessaries. The leader, with his blackboy, rode some distance ahead, then followed two of the party, after whom were driven the spare and pack horses. The distance travelled each day, until they got quite clear of all civilisation, was about fifteen miles, after which they moved according to the discretion of the leader—sometimes remaining camped in one spot for two or three days, while country in the neighbourhood was being examined and marked off; and at others, making a march of ten, or twenty, or even twenty-five miles. Each one was told off for some special duty. For instance, the worst bushman had to undertake the charge of the camp, cook the provisions, and look after the horses, during the absence of the rest on flying excursions. It was especially necessary that this particular charge should be in qualified hands, for the natives were both numerous, and, in some instances, hostile, and made more than one attempt to burn the camp and stores by setting fire to the long grass. The country through which they passed, though here and there good, did not come up to expectation; still they managed to make up in quantity for what was deficient in quality; and the knowledge that a great demand was about to spring up for pasture-lands, which they believed would cause almost any kind to sell, kept them in good spirits. It was, however, nearly impossible that they could live in familiar

intercourse with an almost despotic leader, without having disagreements and causes of complaint. Continual daily annoyances begot pettishness of temper, and there were some who took advantage of a more intimate acquaintance with the chief to shirk the more disagreeable parts of the work and shift it on to others. This Stone especially disliked, and rebelled against; and being in all respects as good, if not a better pilot and bushman than the leader, he became the chief of the opposition in the little wandering community, in which heartburnings and jealousies were as bitterly felt about trifles as they were in greater circles about matters of more importance. It thus happened that whatever Stone advised or proposed, the leader and his backers objected to; and although in point of numbers the party was equally divided, yet the opposite faction, having authority on their side, always carried the day.

When the explorers had been out about four months, and were thinking of returning, in following up a river, the country on whose banks was by no means first-class, they came upon the junction of a large tributary with it, and from the description of dead timber which its waters during previous floods had carried down with them, Stone was of opinion that, by tracing it up for some distance, they might expect to discover better country than they had yet seen. All

hands shared in this view; and an attempt to carry it out was decided on, and some progress made.

In a day or two's time the scrub which lined the banks of the river became so thick and dense, that half the party were employed in cutting a track through it for the pack-horses, who often tore off their now greatly diminished loads against the trees. Before long it was evident that the leader was against further advance, and the arguments which he used had certainly much to recommend them.

The rations were running short, and for some time back the whole party had been on half allowance only. They were a long way out, in a country swarming with natives, owing to which game was both scarce and shy. The season was a most unusually dry one; the grass was withered or burnt by the bush-fires which raged around them; and, most serious of all, the water in the river which they were following up was very scanty, and might fail them altogether.

In vain that Stone pleaded for an advance of three or four more days. The leader was inexorable. Whether convinced that the safety of his expedition depended on a speedy return; or whether, as Stone privately conjectured, he was desirous of getting back to secure for himself and his own friends at a more favourable season the fair land of promise, of the existence of which he was probably convinced, it was hard to say.

He had his way, however, and the little band turned their horses' heads homeward. The night before they struck occupied country, they drew lots for the already discovered and marked pieces of country, and Stone found himself remarkably well off.

It now became necessary to proceed at once to Brisbane, and send in the descriptions to the Crown Lands Office, together with an application for licences; and these arrangements having been successfully concluded, most of the adventurers found ready purchasers for them. Among the rest, our friend Stone parted with his share of the spoil, and made his way up to Betyammo with a considerable credit to the joint account of Mr Gray and himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHARLEY STONE'S EXPEDITION.

OUR exploring friend stayed with the Grays at Bety-ammo during the remainder of the season, and the end of the following wet weather found him once more at Rockhampton, arranging matters with the two companions of his former journey, whose confidence he had secured. Rockhampton at that time was, although very small, by no means a dull place of abode. Situated on the banks of the Fitzroy river, and within easy reach of Brisbane and Sydney by steamer, it formed the depot of supplies for the country which was being taken up and stocked all around. It had also been the port for a "diggings" in the neighbourhood, to which false report had lured thousands some time before, and which, turning out a failure, had caused much distress and misery among those who flocked there, depending on what they could extract from the earth. Just now it was swarming with young men belonging to the new

stations which had been formed in the neighbourhood, and who had come down to port to see about supplies, or engage teams or men. Others there were who, having been out exploring, and having discovered country, were waiting in town until the Crown Lands Commissioner, who resided there, should have leisure to accompany them back to these wilds, and report upon them for Government information. Many young men had driven mobs of horses overland for sale: others had travelled up with large herds of cattle, or flocks of sheep, to stock country previously secured, and had, for convenience' sake partly, and partly from ignorance of a more direct route, taken Rockhampton on their way. Crowds of shepherds, stockmen, drovers, bullock-drivers, shearers, bushmen, &c., were spending their hard-won cheques; and swarms of loafers hung about sponging on their more manly brethren. Besides these, the little town had its own complement of Government officials, bankers, merchants, storekeepers, publicans, &c., who were all more or less known among the pioneers. Money was exceedingly plentiful, and business both brisk and sound.

The young men, who for various reasons were doomed to a certain period of enforced idleness, contributed much to the evil notoriety which the youthful city had acquired for rowdyness. Being mostly high-spirited, reckless men, drawn together by a special

fitness for undergoing hardship, and surmounting the dangers and difficulties of an outside life, it was to be expected that they should possess an unusual amount of vitality; and consequently the aspect of the town was an exceedingly lively one. Drinking, fighting, practical joking, blowing (that is, talking loudly and boastingly on any and every subject), horse-racing, and gambling at all hours of the day or night without let or hindrance, intermixed with business matters, formed the occupation of the inhabitants; and Stone was not sorry when, his arrangements having been concluded, he slipped away quietly, having managed, as he thought, to keep his destination a secret.

Their journey was of an uneventful character until they reached the spot where they had turned back on the previous expedition, the only break to the general monotony being an accident which happened to one of the little party, and which they had reason to be thankful turned out a slight one. The horse ridden by the gentleman in question, a very fiery and rather vicious animal, having had the misfortune, in passing through some bushes, to disturb a large nest of wasps which had there founded a colony, became so maddened and ungovernable under the stings of his assailants, that, unable to throw his rider by fair means, he dashed himself furiously to the ground, crushing the unfortunate young man beneath him. Horror seized upon

the rest. Rushing up, they succeeded in restoring suspended animation, but it was some time before they ascertained whether or not the thigh-bone was intact. Fortunately this proved to be the case. At such a distance from medical aid, an accident of this nature meant a lingering and painful death. The sufferer, however, was able, after two or three days' rest, to renew the journey on a quieter steed.

Just before reaching the large scrub through which they had been cutting their path, previous to retracing their former steps, they came upon several mobs of natives. It was Stone's endeavour, if possible, to avoid a collision with the aboriginals, and they had therefore frequently to camp without lighting a fire, in order to remain as unobserved as possible. Having one night come upon a little plain surrounded by dense scrub, they ventured on making a small blaze, in the belief that the thick vegetation would prevent the glare of the flames from being observed. Merrily they ate their frugal supper, and all were enjoying the solace of that sweet "soother," the evening pipe, and speculating as to the whereabouts of the other expedition, when Stone's blackboy, who had been gazing fixedly in the distance for some time, suddenly pointed to a light on the edge of the scrub, about one hundred and fifty yards away, and excitedly asked in a low tone, "Issay, Missa 'Tone, you think that one fire-'tick?" The ques-

tion—especially coming from the blackboy, experienced in all the ways of his treacherous brethren—naturally caused a start. There was a bright steady little light moving slowly in the direction pointed out, just about the size of the glowing end of lighted bark, which natives invariably carry by night. Were there blacks about? All knew that some natives have the habit of tracking up their foes at night by the aid of fire-sticks.

Another now joined the first, and the doubt of the travellers was fast merging into certainty, when one of the lights slowly rose in the air and floated upwards, followed at a little distance by the other. Now they sank, and again they rose, chasing each other through the silent night—wandering fires in the "blackness of darkness."

All breathe more freely. The blackboy burst into a laugh. "My word, me been think black fellow come up. What for pireply walk about, gammon you and me like it that?"[1] But the alarms were not yet over. Scarcely half an hour had elapsed, and the tired bushmen were thinking of turning in, when one of the party uttering rapidly the warning, "Look out!" seized his carbine, and dropped on his knees behind a large tree, close to which he had been lying. The effect was magical. In less than a minute each one had done the same, each grasping a weapon. Nothing now

[1] Why do the fireflies travel about, deceiving you and me thus?

could be seen of the little group which, a moment before, were quietly lying and chatting together. The small spot, illumined by the light of the fire, was now empty. Dead silence reigned, amid which could be heard footsteps stealthily approaching. Click, click, click, click, went the hammers of as many carbines. An instant more, and a fitful gleam from the fire has thrown a dim uncertain light on an approaching black figure, discovering its legs, breast, and eyes, with a white mark on the forehead, after the manner of the aboriginals; and in the same moment, Stone, who is nearest, shouts, "Hold on, boys! don't shoot. It's the old mare's black foal!" and so it was. The creature, whose maternal parent was grazing in the vicinity, had (attracted by the fire) approached cautiously, sniffing curiously as it advanced; and the start it had occasioned now caused many a hearty laugh from the much-relieved little band, each detailing his own personal feelings during the crisis.

About a week's hard work enabled them to pierce the dense scrub, and the sight which then met their eyes was in itself a sufficient reward for their determination and perseverance. Apparently limitless downs, clothed with the richest grasses and herbs, rolled away before them. A range of noble, curiously-shaped peaks and hills stretched away on their right, while every few miles they crossed running brooks of

clear water. They had indeed discovered a land, the existence of which would prove not only a mine of wealth to themselves, but also to the colony at large. Mounting a high hill near their camp, they gazed with enraptured eyes on the far-stretching plains melting away in the distance, until they were lost in the hazy sky-line, crossed by belts of timber and intersected by streams, little knolls crowned with clumps of scrub varying prettily the undulating downs and swelling timbered ridges. How their souls bounded! Oh the glory of being the first white men to tread what might be the future home of thousands of their race! It was a moment worth living for. All was theirs. From the blue mountain-peaks here, where the thin, grey, spiral signal-smoke of the wild man curled away aloft to the far horizon, ay, and for hundreds of miles beyond (for who could predict its limits?)—all was theirs.

Setting to work briskly now, they surveyed roughly the features of the land, and daily became more aware of the importance of their discovery. They appeared to have struck the rich country at its junction with a poorer tract—what seemed also the index of a vast extent of country of a similar character. Several large runs had been measured off in the usual manner, when, as they were proceeding one day to commence on fresh ground, they were astonished to come upon the tracks of shod horses. There were a large number, evidently

being ridden and driven, and going in the direction they had come from. All stopped aghast. It was without doubt an exploring party. On that soft virgin soil no horse's foot had ever before trodden down the succulent grasses. A shower of rain which had fallen here rendered it difficult to determine the precise age of the tracks; but ten days had already elapsed since then, and it was possible that a fortnight or three weeks had passed since they were made. It was not to be supposed that their own tracks could have remained unnoticed, and already their rivals might be straining their horses in the endeavour to reach the settlements, and forward their applications for the country.

It was a great blow to the plucky little company. The direction they came from puzzled them most. When refusing to proceed further during the former expedition, the thought of an easier and more expeditious track into the unseen country must have occurred to their leader. Doubtless he had found it on the other side, and probably was as much surprised to see their tracks as they were to find his. Had they met, they might have made a compromise; but, under existing circumstances, each party's thought must be how to turn matters to their respective advantages. But what was to be done? Hastily returning to camp, a special council was held. Everything depended on

getting down before the others. It was true that their rivals had had no time to make such a survey of the country as they had done, but to their experienced leader nothing was easier than to take the bearings of the most remarkable points from some unmistakable spot, and define vaguely the boundaries of runs by compass, which would answer his purpose almost as well. Their hopes of reward hinged upon getting their applications into the office, and marked with the day and hour of their receipt, before the others could arrive. How was this to be effected? A stern-chase is proverbially a long one, and the members of the other expedition were quite as alive to the necessity for haste as they themselves were. It was maddening to think that they should be deprived of what they had undergone so much to secure.

They could not remain to look for other country. The ration supplies would not admit of a protracted stay; besides which, many different parties were out; and without information as to the routes taken by these, they might only incur a similar mischance.

At last Stone broke silence. "I think," he said, "I know a way to manage—that is, if they have not got too much the start of us."

"What's your idea?" eagerly asked the other two.

"Well," he returned, "down on the sea-coast, straight down from here, there is a Bêche-de-mer fishing-station.

I know the men well; they have two or three fast-sailing whale-boats. What I propose is to push down there, and offer a fifty-pound note, or a hundred, if need be, for a passage to Rockhampton, and chance finding a steamer from there. It is our safest plan. I will go with the blackboy. You two can start down overland. I do not think it possible, should they have started, that you can overtake them; still something may occur on the road to delay them; and we must neglect no opportunity. I won't promise," continued he, "that I can get down from the Bêche-de-mer station, for their boats may be absent, or the men may be away on the 'ketch' which they belong to. All I will say is, that if there, for old acquaintance' sake and a good cheque, they may be induced to go."

After some deliberation this plan was adopted; and a couple of hours later saw Stone commence his journey. It was by no means an easy task which he had set before himself, and it was fraught with hazard to both him and his boy. He had the knowledge that a Bêche-de-mer fishing-station existed somewhere near the mouth of a large river, the estuary of which he had observed a considerable time before, during a short cruise which he had made along the coast: but no one knew the country inland; and so many rivers took their rise on the coast-range, that it was quite possible he might follow down the wrong one to the sea-coast, and then

get entangled in a labyrinth of salt-water inlets, mangroves, and vine-scrubs. He had only taken one fortnight's rations; but this he intended to spin out by putting himself and his faithful attendant on half-rations, in case the worst should happen.

He must succeed. He shut his eyes resolutely to the dangers which a well-equipped party might escape, but which were magnified a hundred times in his case; and equally cheerful and determined was his companion. Each leading a spare horse, they pushed on until darkness compelled them to stop. Guided partly by compass, and partly by that curious and infallible instinct which some men possess in so very remarkable a degree, they made their way at considerable speed for some days until they arrived at the high coast-range. In doing so, some country was passed over which, with an explorer's eye, the white man mentally resolved should be examined on a future occasion; at present, time did not permit.

From the range, the sight of the hazy sea, at a distance of seventy or eighty miles, cheered them; and Stone fancied that he recognised the towering peak of an island near their destination.

After descending the coast side of the range, the grass became longer—reaching, indeed, sometimes over their heads on horseback. It was armed with a barbed seed nearly half an inch in length. These grass-seeds,

being ripe, adhered in such profusion to their persons that they felt like immense porcupines; and the seeds working into the flesh in a thousand directions, also caused acute pain and irritation. The great size of the seeds enabled them to extract them more easily than the smaller and infinitely more troublesome kinds which grew inland; but nevertheless the annoyance was extreme. The horses also suffered much in forcing their way through the long wiry grass, which, cutting their fetlock-joints, caused each step to be made in pain.

The tarantula spiders—heavy, fat-bodied, horrid creatures, almost as large as small birds, with legs fully two inches long—spread their webs everywhere between the trees; and, in their haste and preoccupation of mind, the travellers frequently ran into the snare, their heads getting covered with the strong, sticky structure, like a veil. The disgust was enhanced by feeling the hateful architect run swiftly across their faces as he made his escape. Millions of flies and insects of all kinds were sheltered and protected by the long grass. The common fly covered their persons, seemingly enjoying the pleasure of travelling on horseback. Little groups of them buzzed in front of the travellers' eyes, alighting on the corners of them, and renewing their attacks, when driven away, with a pertinacity only to be overcome

by death. The well-known blight-fly intimated his unwelcome presence by stinging the blackboy in the eye, the lids of which instantly swelled to the size of a hen's egg, and remained so for the next two or three days, causing intense irritation. Tiny sand-flies swarmed in myriads about the horses' ears, or sat in patches over their bodies, goading them to distraction; and at night the mosquitoes united in one continual hum of joy as they pursued their philanthropical investigations.

Pushing along, they came at last to the banks of a broad river, which, from its size, Stone felt assured must be the one which debouched into the ocean near the spot he was desirous of attaining. The top banks were nearly 100 feet above the level of the water. About half-way between the water and the highest banks a broad terrace ran, forming a second band. Along the water's edge, noble ti-trees, whose drooping branches swept the stream, formed a fringe, the dark green of their thick foliage being relieved now and then as the white cockatoos flew among their branches, or rose in a vast cloud of spotless purity but with unearthly noise.

The river's bed is full of large sandbanks, upon which alligators may be seen lying motionless with widely distended jaws. Native "companions" and brilliantly plumaged cranes and herons stalk about

in the shallow water. Pelicans with huge beaks sail about majestically, surrounded by smaller fry of all sorts. New descriptions of water-fowl are met with here and there. A little distance further on they come to a camp of flying-foxes. The huge trees on both sides of the river are actually black with them. The great bats hang by their hooked wings to every available branch and twig, squealing and quarrelling. The smell is dreadful. The camp extends for a length of three miles. There must be millions upon millions of them. Wild figs grow plentifully, as also do the beautiful plum-trees covered with fruit, and flowering vines twine themselves gracefully round their stems. Sometimes groups of natives are seen fishing in the river. They must be numerous about here. The trees bear the frequent marks of their stone tomahawks, and little beaten paths lead down to the water's edge. They have hitherto, as far as the travellers are aware, evaded being seen by them. They each watch half through the night. The blackboy is invaluable from his cool courage; and on one occasion, when Stone's excited fancy led him to believe that he actually heard the rustling of the grass as the savages stole up, he remarked with a grin, alluding to the clouds of mosquitoes and the naked skins of the aborigines, "Supposing black fellow come, you hear him like it that," slapping his own shoulder at the same

time in the act of killing a mosquito, which from their numbers, he probably did.

They have now to cross the river; and they succeed, after being nearly swallowed up in the treacherous quick-sands, of which it is full. Now they approach the sea, and the cycas-palms so common on the coast-range disappear. The iron-bark and gum trees are mixed with stunted ti-trees, grass-trees, and curious weird-looking pandanus-trees. Impenetrable vine-scrubs line the river-banks at intervals.

Hurrah! a salt-water creek. The travellers rejoice; they feel they are approaching their destination, but still their troubles are not over. The salt-water creeks are numerous. They are slimy gulfs of oozing mud when the tide is out, and alligators lurk in their sluggish depths when in, and crossed they must be. Mangrove-swamps must be got round. The white man is to be pitied who gets lost in one of them. They are the home of alligators, poisonous reptiles, leeches, frogs, and other abominations—a bottomless pit of stinking deep slime, swarming with sand-flies, mosquitoes, centipedes, and scorpions. Now they ride down to the beach, passing by a platform erected on four tall forks, on which lie exposed to the wind and sun the dried remains of some dark warrior, and they eagerly gaze for a sign of the presence of white men.

Some distance down the coast Stone joyfully recog-

nised his island, and they pushed along the sandy beach until evening, when, to their great relief and delight, they found themselves at the fishing-station which it had been their object to reach.

The hardy sailors were no less surprised than glad to welcome their old acquaintance at their out-of-the-way home, and readily agreed to take Stone down in a whaleboat, and allow the boy to remain at their camp with the horses until he could be sent for. They were engaged in smoking a large haul of "tit" fish which they had made on a neighbouring reef. Their "ketch" was beached high and dry near the camp; and, on the whole, they had very comfortable quarters.

That evening the boat was got ready to start, and long before day broke she had left the hospitable camp far behind her, and was running free before a favouring breeze, with Stone sound asleep (the first time in security for many months), wrapped in a spare sail. A good rest refreshed him greatly, and the invigorating sea-breeze, together with his successful trip, emboldened him to hope for a favourable termination to his enterprise. The whale-boat cut along merrily, never shipping a sea. Oh the mercy of the open ocean breeze, and the companionship of his own people after his late sufferings! The sapphire sea, out of which rose innumerable little fairy islands,

some clothed with dark cedars and pines to the water's edge, others mere spots of emerald sward, washed a silver beach-line. Piercing the clear waters, the eye could discern forests of branching coral, through which the fish darted in shoals, or fed motionless on their marine pasture. Now and then a sea-snake is passed, coiled with his head erect on the top of a crested wave; or the fin of a shark is seen as it cruises after its prey; or a little bark-canoe darts from one island to another, and is lost to view among its verdure.

But what pen can describe the glorious beauty of evening, when the setting sun, amid a blaze of gold and purple, dipped beneath the waters of the Pacific, gilding far and wide the glowing sea and the dark mountain-tops? or the tropical beauty of the night, its stillness unbroken only by the roar of the fire-flashing breakers as they boomed on the sunken coral-ledges, or rolled in waves of light towards that unknown shore? They had a capital run; and as they approach the entrance of the Fitzroy, the black smoke of a steamer making her way down from the flats is seen above the trees. This is indeed a piece of luck. It is the Australian Steam Navigation Company's steamer the Boomerang, bound south. Another half-hour, and it would have been too late for another week. She stops; and as the whale-boat runs alongside and lowers her sail, Stone, who is in the stern-

sheets, recognises many a familiar face and voice among the throng who lean over her side looking down on them.

His own rough appearance for a time protects his identity. His hair and beard have grown long, the wide brim of his soft felt hat has lost its stiffening, and hangs limply on his shoulders; his shirt and trousers have become of no particular hue, and bear the mark of many a thorny struggle; while his revolver, carbine, and red blanket impart a picturesqueness not uncommon in these parts.

Bidding a hearty good-bye to his friends in need, and handing them a handsome cheque, he climbed up the ladder. The little whale-boat filled her sail and stood away for Rockhampton, where her crew will yet be in time to get a skinful of grog before night.

Once on board he is surrounded by friends. Naturally he is asked whence he comes from; and he has barely given a vague account of his journey, when he is informed of the wonderful discovery which has been made by his rivals, whose party was about arriving when the steamer left. His hopes, so bright a while ago, sink. He asks why none of them are on board, and is informed that the mail-man to the few stations on the other side of Rockhampton has brought in the news, having out-travelled the explorers.

He breathes once more. No doubt their applica-

tions are with the mail the vessel carries. Should he present his own before the delivery of the steamer's letters, the victory will yet be his. A friend supplied him with the necessary outfit; and when the old Boomerang makes fast to the Australian Steam Navigation Company's wharf on the Brisbane river, he hurries off to the Crown Lands Office, which is fortunately open, and, presenting the papers which he has had time to make out on board, has the satisfaction of learning that no other applications for country have arrived from that quarter.

He has gained the day. Hurrah! Nothing like push. Back to the steamer. Champagne all round. He tells his story. Hurrah for the north! More champagne. Away up to "Braysher's" now. What a huge town Brisbane looks after the wild, solitary bush! It is a kind of London. One can never tire of walking up and down Queen Street watching one's fellow-creatures, and staring at the shops. The sight of so many human beings causes a wild excitement, heightened at night when the lamps blaze and glitter. It is not altogether to be wondered at that the "bushman" should commit excess after his silent life of rigorous self-denial and privation.

How strange is the feeling of walking up-stairs and viewing one's figure in a pier-glass! How glorious is the return to a land of plenty—a land of fresh veget-

ables and properly cooked food! One looks upon the black-coated waiter with a kind of respectful awe, and feels quite thankful when he quietly pockets his tip without upbraiding one with an attempt to purchase his sympathies. The dark, bronzed face, and the rough hands, mark one out to the store-keepers and other leeches as proper prey: but never mind; what's the odds? It is not every day one sees a town.

Every bushman has experienced these feelings on his return to civilisation after a long absence, and so also did Stone, his delight being much increased by his triumph. He had, however, a stronger attraction at Betyammo, whither he hastened as soon as possible.

The following mail took back the welcome intimation to his companions, one of whom returned to the Bêche-de-mer station and brought home overland the horses and boy, whose arrival was hailed with much rejoicing by his tribe, and with no less cordiality than sincerity by his master.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARING FOR THE YERING MEETING—EMIN BEY—FITZGERALD'S SYDNEY ADVENTURE.

STONE'S stay at Mr Gray's station this time was productive of many results. In the first place, he arranged with his future father-in-law to stock the newly discovered country as soon as possible. His own marriage was to take place in a couple of months' time, and he had promised Bessie a short trip down to Sydney afterwards, to which she looked forward with excited delight. Fitzgerald had also been much oftener at Betyammo since the explorer's return than for some time previously; and on returning to Ungahrun he frequently expatiated on the happiness of the little party at Mr Gray's to John, and sometimes he wondered, musingly, why it was that Phœbe refused all offers of marriage. He thought she was far more suitable for a wife than wild, merry Bessie. He evidently liked riding over to Betyammo very much more than formerly, whatever was the cause.

Stone's description of the country, and of its probable future value, had weighed so strongly with Fitzgerald, that, on his representations, his father had bought a run from one of the explorer's companions. This, while it adjoined the fine downs country belonging to Mr Gray and Stone, was, he thought, although of a poorer character, more suited as a cattle-station, from its being timbered and better watered; and it was proposed that John should go up in charge of the cattle to stock it, as a managing partner. The money saved from the wreck which Cosgrove and M'Duff had made of his inheritance, together with his salary since he joined Fitzgerald, formed part of the investing money, and his kind friends gave him liberal terms, and plenty of time to pay off the rest. This was too good an offer to be neglected; and the belief that the station would soon double its value, with the rapidly increasing population of the colony, once more restored his fervent hopes of success in life.

All went merrily, therefore, after Stone's return. Sometimes some of the girls of the neighbourhood, of whom there were not many, would gather at Betyammo, around the bride-elect, excitedly interested in the coming event; and then it curiously happened that a number of gentlemen found that business of importance called them there also, and picnics, junketings of all kinds, and riding parties, were the inevitable consequences.

Great doings were looked forward to at the forthcoming races. The little township of Yering was the headquarters of a very well supported racing club, and the squatters and landowners round about had much pride in boasting that the liberal prizes offered at their meeting had the effect of attracting first-class cracks from Randwick and Homebush.[1] At the race-ball, which took place there, all the beauty of the district delighted to meet, and it was arranged that this should be Bessie's last public appearance before her marriage. The Ungahrun people had also much interest in the coming struggle.

Fitzgerald had long had a notion that his black horse was possessed of a great turn of speed, and John had determined to test his merits thoroughly. With this view he had entered him for the Yering Cup, and another race or two to be contested for at the same time.

The meeting was fast approaching, and every morning at earliest dawn John might be seen with his enthusiastic assistant Tommy, as they gave the animal his morning gallop on a nice level bit of plain just outside the paddock.

"Emin Bey"—for so John had christened him, after one of his heroes, the bold Mameluke, who leaped his charger over the blood-stained walls of the

[1] Noted race-courses in New South Wales.

Cairo citadel to the dizzy plain below—was really a noble creature. His head showed, in the deep cheek, wide forehead and throat, full soft eye, long delicate ears, and general leanness, the unmistakable traces of his sire's Eastern origin. Long-bodied but short-backed, with round, well-sprung barrel and powerful hind-quarters, the veins standing out like network on his shiny satin-like skin, his appearance justified their faith in him. He was perhaps a trifle loose in the couplings, but that, at any rate, was no bar to his travelling qualities; and a glance at the muscular fore-arms, short clean cannon-bones, broad flat hocks, and long lathy yet iron-sinewed pasterns, assured them that the freedom from work which he had hitherto enjoyed, had materially assisted in developing those powers on which rested their hopes.

Watch him as he stands there, trembling all over with excitement, every nerve quivering; the beautiful creature knows that in another instant he will be eating up the morning air as he tears his lightning path through it.

Tommy mounts lightly, for John has grown much too heavy. Off! away he flies! see how the supple back curves with every stride! He is like a huge greyhound. Here he comes! John times him as he arrives. If he does equally well on Yering course, it will take a good horse to beat him.

Ralf Cosgrove has also an interest in the Yering meeting this year of no common order. His demands upon Messrs Bond and Foreclose during the last two years had been so heavy, that his infuriated father had peremptorily forbidden them to advance one shilling more, and Ralf's affairs looked desperate. Surrounded on all sides by men who understood the art of plucking, in its nicest sense, he could not exist without money. Once that failed, his importance went with it—for Ralf, with all the will in the world, was not possessed of sufficient skill to turn hawk himself. He owed money everywhere. Creditors began to dun him, and at last, at the instigation of his evil genius Cane, he drew a cheque on the station agents, which he signed in imitation of M'Duff's crooked, twig-like characters. It was a capital imitation, and so easy, — the two young men roared at the perfect resemblance. Ralf found no difficulty in writing off one after another of them, and it answered well, for Messrs Bond and Foreclose paid them without scruple. Once more afloat, his usual recklessness returned, until the breakdown of the favourite on Randwick again upset his equilibrium.

He and Cane had some time previously purchased between them a well-known Sydney horse, whose performances, although a shade too slow to secure

him first-class honours on the metropolitan turf, were nevertheless considerably better than those of any horse he might expect to contend against at an up-country meeting, and the animal had been bought chiefly with the view of entering him for the coming Yering races.

Ralf was well acquainted with the capabilities of the various horses in the district; indeed there was only one to fear,— a horse belonging to the Bindarobina station, brought out and raced at the expense of the shareholders in that concern by its aristocratic superintendent.

Cosgrove's affairs were so desperate now that a desperate effort was required to set them straight. To meet the Randwick losses Ralf had been again necessitated to use M'Duff's name — this time to a set of bills which his creditors held in security—the first of them being due a short time after the Yering meeting. Accordingly they resolved to risk all upon the success of their horse.

He couldn't fail. They would take every precaution. The Yering people knew nothing of the thousand and one dodges of the great courses, and Cane and he had not served a good apprenticeship to the craft without as yet profiting by it.

The affairs of the former worthy were quite as desperate as those of his patron. His brutal, domin-

eering vulgarity had made him hated by those whose interests it had formerly been to cultivate his company. Insolent and overbearing, his own proper "crowd" detested him. During the last twelvemonths he had given himself greatly up to drink, which had by no means improved him; and although he had made a cat's-paw of his friend in the matter of forgery, he would not have hesitated in entering upon any desperate attempt to possess himself of funds.

It was at this stage of their history that they started up to Brisbane, and thence made their way to Yering township, with their confidential following of "jock" and stable-helps. Here they took up their residence for the time being, much courted and flattered by Mr Sub-Inspector Dowlan, who felt it quite an honour to walk about with such well-known turfites, and whose cordial sympathy and co-operation they had bought, by taking him, to a certain extent, into their counsels. To his disparaging shrugging of the shoulders and contemptuous nodding of the head they were obliged for much long odds laid against their horse by the confiding sheep and cattle men of the district, who all "knew Dowlan." He was a real good fellow, and would give them the straight tip. He managed, however, to back the Sydney crack quietly, right and left; and as the Bindarobina

horse was the favourite of the district, he found not a few takers.

About a fortnight before the races came off, Fitzgerald was called to Sydney to confer on urgent business with his father. It was rather annoying to miss the fun which all looked forward to at Bessie's wedding, and he had also grown much interested in the success of his horse; but it could not be helped. The days spent in Sydney were to him a very weariness of the flesh. He had no sympathies in common with the office and general pen-and-ink style of men who swarm in every city, and there were but few bushmen in town at this time of the year.

His father and mother occupied a beautiful residence at Pott's Point, looking out on the sea. A charming garden, laid out in terraces decorated with statues, fountains, and shady bowers, ran down to a snug little yacht anchorage, in which a trim, rakish-looking cutter, with an immense tapering mast, rode securely at anchor, — for Mr Fitzgerald, senior, although stiff and well up in years, still retained that love of outdoor amusements which had ever characterised him.

From the marble-pillared verandah on one side a full view could be had of the harbour right up to the head; and it was a glorious sight, when blowing fresh, to watch the white horses rearing their watery crests

as they charged madly into the very heart of the city. On the other side of the house a not less beautiful scene met the gaze. The broad expanse of "Wooloomooloo Bay" ran into the town in the shape of a crescent, of which Pott's Point and another beautiful promontory formed the horns; while still further over lay another yet more lovely little cove, surrounded by the enchanting Botanical Gardens and the pleasure-grounds, from amid which the castellated towers of Government House looked down upon Garden Island, the little island-tower of Fort Denison, and the men-of-war at anchor. On the opposite side of the harbour could be seen the north shore, dotted with handsome villas and gardens, Neutral Bay, and the dark-timbered eminences stretching away towards Middle Harbour. Hundreds of ships lay at anchor; steamers came and went; yachts glided, fairy-like, in and out of the most beautiful nooks, or tacked about with their freight of pleasure-seekers; and a multitude of smaller craft covered the water.

Any man might have enjoyed a stay in such a home, fitted with every comfort, and encircled by troops of friends, but Willie Fitzgerald's tastes did not lie that way. He would not have exchanged one hour of the free, healthy, bush-life for a month of Sydney's delights and dissipations. Obliged by business to stay a certain period in town, he found time hang

very heavy on his hands. He wandered into his club and read the papers listlessly, and wandered out again. Sometimes he would stroll along George Street to the "Royal," in the hope of catching a stray bushman down on business like himself, but at this time of year the city was always bare of that lively class. He had, in desperation, commenced a flirtation with one of the fascinating damsels belonging to the bar of that much-frequented establishment, when a trivial event completely changed his thoughts, and gave a new impetus to his existence.

Calling late in the afternoon to pay a farewell visit at the house of a gentleman, with whom, in the course of his business, he had become acquainted, he was shown into a large and tastefully furnished drawing-room. The chairs, ottomans, and sofas, &c., as well as the window-hangings, were in amber satin. The floor was of inlaid Zürich wood tiles, of particularly fine manufacture, and arranged in carefully chosen colours. Articles of *virtu* of all kinds, Parian marble statues, ormolu clocks, antique vases, ivory carvings, Chinese embroidery, old china, and a thousand and one expensive and useless articles of the Western and Eastern worlds, lay scattered about. An immense window, looking out upon the sheltered cove and the Botanical Gardens, occupied nearly all of one side of the room, the beautiful view being reproduced in huge

mirrors, skilfully arranged with that design on the opposite side. Large plate-glass folding-doors led into a spacious and elegantly-fitted-up conservatory, on the third side, the pillared supporters of its roof being twined round with graceful and rare creepers. This tropical display of broad-leafed plants and glorious flowering creepers and shrubs was also made by an ingenious adjustment of mirrors to multiply its beauties. A few choice landscapes, in oil and water colours, adorned here and there the harmoniously papered walls, while the ceiling was toned and decorated to match the rest of the apartment.

As Fitzgerald entered, his eye fell upon the figure of a lady standing near the window, gazing upon the calm glassy sea and dark Norfolk pines of the gardens. The flood of evening sunset bathed her figure in light, and, reflected by the mirrored walls, caused the room to shine in a perfect blaze of warm golden light. So deep had been her preoccupation of mind that she did not hear the announcement of his name, and continued her meditations. As Fitzgerald approached he became aware that she was much younger than the lady he had called upon, although her back was as yet turned to him. The figure, though not exactly tall, carried with it an idea of height. The form was exceedingly graceful; and the attitude of pensive thought, as she leant slightly upon a marble pillar of the window,

contrasted strongly, as did her dark, quiet dress, with the gorgeous richness of her surroundings.

A premonitory hem from Fitzgerald drew her attention towards him, and as she turned round her great beauty became apparent. The contour of the head was of a purely Grecian type. Large masses of brown hair were done up simply, and formed a great shining knot behind. Her eyes were full and large, and rather oblong, the soft brown pupils relieved by the china-like purity of the white. A delicate bewitching nose, and a pair of arch lips, which ceaselessly formed themselves into those enchanting curves, so common in childhood and so rare in after-life, together with rows of little pearly teeth, and a rounded chin in which lurked a roguish dimple, ever and anon appearing to hide itself as quickly, completed an oval face of a loveliness never before observed by the squatter, who stood bewildered.

With perfect self-possession, but quietly, and with a modest, maiden-like grace, the young girl received the stranger, and explained that the lady to whom he was desirous of paying his respects was from home, but would shortly return; and Fitzgerald, more and more struck with the sweet, sad expression of the features, and the composed manner of his entertainer, took advantage of the opportunity to prolong his visit and improve his acquaintance. Her conversation had

no less charm for him than her beauty. She spoke of England and its scenery as compared with that of Australia, until Fitzgerald thought it the most delightful place in the world. She praised the beauty of the scene before them, and it instantly acquired tenfold more loveliness than he had noticed in it before. She spoke of Tennyson, and Browning, and Longfellow, and poor Willie Fitzgerald felt himself on unknown ground, and mentally resolved to give up several hours each day to their study. An hour flew past. It was time to go, but he could not wrench himself away. The long dark lashes which fringed the expressive eyes rested on a cheek on which the rich colour, mantling through the dark yet transparent skin, came and went with every emotion. Willie Fitzgerald had discovered a new world in the calm dark depths hidden by those drooping lashes.

The lady not arriving, he was at last obliged, for very shame's sake, to rise and take his departure.

His mind dwelt upon the dark beauty of the young girl he had left. He could not rest. Who was she? What was her name? Why was it that he only met her on the very last day of his stay in town? He had hated Sydney, and longed for his bush home. Now he would have given the world to stay.

What an ass he had been! Invited over and over again to visit the house he had just left, he

had put off doing so until the last moment, and had thrown away chance after chance of seeing the being whom of all others he felt he loved most. He had only seen her for an hour. He would think of her no more. He sought out his old haunts, but could find no peace.

The sad quiet face with the expressive eyes haunted him. He returned to the house that night, and several times was on the point of ringing the bell and making a second visit, but felt that they would think it strange in him doing so, and he wound up by walking up and down in front of her window. He had to leave next morning early, and did not even know her name. He started once more into town, and searched among the men at the club for one who could give him information on the subject nearest his heart, but without success for some time.

At last one who had overheard him making inquiries remarked, carelessly, "Oh, you mean that pretty, quiet-looking girl at Mrs Berkeley's? She is, I think, some relative of hers. She is a Miss Bouverie, and has only lately come to Sydney."

That was all he learned about one who had made a stronger impression on him than any one ever had done before; and when next morning he stood on the deck of the steamer gazing at Mrs Berkeley's fast receding mansion, he felt he had left his heart behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUSH HOSPITALITY—THE MAN-TRAP—A DANCE IN A WOOL-SHED—THE RACE-BALL.

WHILE at Yering township, Ralf thought proper to take a run over to Cambaranga, to see old M'Duff, and discover if possible whether or not any intimation of the free use which had been made of his name had as yet reached him.

He found the old superintendent raging. His Sydney letters had that day brought him the intelligence; and so much put out was he about the circumstance, that had it not been for the expected visit of a gold-fields' butcher, who was desirous of buying a large number of fat wethers, he would have started down to town at once.

Ralf's heart quaked when he saw the fearful rage and determined anger of the man who had law on his side. He did not dare to think of what might happen should his plans fail, and his bills be presented and left unpaid. He rejoiced that no sus-

picion of his guilt had crossed old M'Duff's mind, and he hastened back to Yering, more resolved than ever to effect a success, whatever the cost might be.

About a week before the eventful day, John had sent Emin Bey, under the careful charge of Tommy, to a station within a couple of miles of Yering. It was owned by a jolly, bluff, hearty squatter, with a great taste for field-sports of all kinds. His motherly wife, and a large family of sons and daughters, contributed to keep up the reputation which the hospitable establishment had earned for itself, even in this land of unlimited hospitality; and an invitation had been sent to the Betyammo people, together with those at Ungahrun and Mosquito Creek, begging them to make "Oorgootoolah" their home during the race-week.

The Betyammo station seemed the acknowledged rendezvous of all living in that part of the district; and three days before the festival commenced, a large party, who had mustered there, and who, to tell the truth, had been holding a small carnival of kangaroo-hunting, impromptu racing, dancing, croquet, and picnics (the excuse, of course, being Bessie's approaching wedding), set out on horseback for Oorgootoolah. Mr Gray and his wife, indeed, travelled in the buggy, but the younger members of the joyous band preferred the more exciting mode. Much laughing and amusement

whiled the time away. The gentlemen rode their finest steeds, and many a one felt a gush of everlasting gratitude, as the hot or wicked-tempered creature under him gave him an opportunity of displaying before the bright though rather critical eyes of the admiring ladies, the art he especially plumed himself on.

A merry laughing throng, they arrived in a body at Oorgootoolah, where the hearty old squatter, with his stalwart sons and bouncing, fresh, happy-faced daughters, received them heartily.

The house was not a large one, and under ordinary circumstances the family were quite sufficient to fill it; but, "God bless me!" cries the large-hearted squatter, "it's made of elastic. There's room for any amount more." Mr and Mrs Gray are accommodated with a chamber, the daughters run off laughing and whispering with Phœbe, Bessie, and the other girls, to some mysterious quarters in the friendly old house; and the men, after turning their horses into the paddock, carry their saddles and valises into a large store prepared for their reception. There is room here for fifty, rolled up on the floor; and should that fail them, there is no end of other places; or the bush, as a fall back, where, indeed, some of them prefer camping as it is.

John found his horse thriving well under Tommy,

who is so careful of him that he will not leave him day or night.

"You see, sir," he explains, "there are no end of loafing vagabonds about that 'ere Yering; who knows but what some of 'em might take it into their heads to get at him?"

"Not much fear of that, Tommy," said John. "Go into the town, my lad, and look about you: the horse is a dark one; no one but ourselves knows anything of what he can do." But Tommy preferred staying with his idol.

"No, no; he wouldn't give any one the chance."

John took a ride in during the course of the day, and found the little place in great excitement. Men from all parts of the district were congregated together, spending money recklessly, and the usual scenes were occurring. He had hardly got off his horse at the door of the hotel, when Dowlan came up to him, in an unusually friendly manner, and offering his hand, winked knowingly. "I say, West" (whispers this in John's ear), "I can put you up to the right thing this time,—give you the straight tip, old man."

John, who detested Dowlan, coolly walked past him. He had learnt to despise the man's venality during the period of his sheep disasters. At that time Dowlan, who, with the district in common, had learnt the story, and who had formerly been a trusted ally of

simple-hearted John, had mortally wounded him by cutting him sedulously in public. It was beneath the dignity of the sub-inspector to know a man who "had had losses." He had crawled his way up in "the foorce" to his present distinguished position from obscurity; he could not tarnish its brightness by any act of disinterestedness. Since John had been taken in hand by Fitzgerald, he had steadily endeavoured to propitiate his goodwill, but ineffectually; and Fitzgerald himself, although not so bitter as our hero, had the lowest opinion of him as a cad.

Pocketing the affront, Dowlan once more approached and obtruded himself upon John, who was standing talking to the two Mosquito Creek squatters, offering to introduce him to Ralf and Cane. "Very intimate friends of mine," he added.

John shook his head. "Don't want to know them, thank you," he said, walking away. It was useless. Dowlan turned his attention to others. His voice, with its rich accent, could be heard among the rest, praising loudly the style and action of the Bindarobina horse, as well as those of the district generally.

Much drinking was going on in the bar parlours, and more in the bars. The little township was afflicted with no less than five large public-houses, two of them devoted to the entertainment of the better classes; the others being patronised by the inferior grades.

Having some business at the far end of the long, straggling street—the only one the place could boast of—he had occasion to pass one of these, the Bushman's Arms, when he heard his name shouted out two or three times in a half-drunken tone, and looking up, he saw his old friend Graham, the Cambaranga overseer, standing on the verandah, which was raised on piles some distance above the ground, swaying unsteadily, with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. Two or three dirty-looking fellows were in his company, and the bar looked pretty full of men, more or less under the influence of drink.

Old Graham had long before confided to John his history. It was a common one in Australia. Married to a respectable woman, by whom he had several children, some of them by this time nearly grown up, he was compelled to leave a good situation in the vicinity of a large town, owing to the cursed habit of drinking which he had acquired. A loving husband and a kind father when sober, he became a madman when drunk. Once "on the burst," as he phrased it, money, horses, cows, furniture, even his wife's wearing apparel, went to feed the insatiable and cruel demon who possessed him; and his poor wife, after hard struggling, and battling bravely with her shame and misery, had, for her children's sake, to insist upon his departure.

Being a first-class sheep-overseer, and when away from liquor a highly trustworthy man, he easily got a situation on a station, where, having no opportunities of gratifying his propensity, he was soon able to remit some money to those whom he dearly loved, yet whose blight the cursed habit had made him. He had essayed several times to pay a visit to his loved ones since his banishment, but in vain. The first public-house he came to proved a man-trap which never failed to ensnare the unhappy man, who spent a wild delirious week of excitement, to awaken to a weakened frame and an agonised paroxysm of remorse, compared with which his other sufferings were as nothing. Moneyless and on foot, with trembling limbs and nerves, gazing fearfully around him at the dreadful forms stealthily tracking him up, or the gibbering faces, mowing and grinning behind every bush and seated on every tree, he would creep back, abased, wrecked, and shorn of his self-esteem, to commence afresh in desperation, develop afresh into good resolutions, strengthen afresh into firm determination, and succumb at last to the devilish wiles of the soul and body destroyers, who neglected no device to lure him into their nets.

Many were the plans formed by poor old Graham to elude his tempters and succeed in reaching a town. Having, after steady laborious work, once

more amassed a good round sum, he would again plan his hitherto unaccomplished home journey. He would travel through the bush. He would not go along the road. He would not even suffer his eyes to rest on the building containing the liquor which exercised its fearful influence so terribly. Night and day, as the hour of his departure drew nearer, he would scheme and plot. He yearned for home. He purchased his presents for the dear ones over and over again in thought. He even contemplated remaining with them altogether—for, indeed, if he could resist these public-houses on his way down, might he not fairly claim to be reformed? And yet, when the day of settlement came, he would indignantly reject the offer of a cheque payable only in Sydney, where his family lived. That was an insult to him. He could surely take care of the money himself. He wanted to buy some things on the road. Already he felt excited as he prepared for his start. Already his stomach began to burn and gnaw. Already the evil spirit dwelling in that swept and garnished habitation has roused up his seven sleeping brethren, more cunning and devilishly malicious than himself, and who, rushing to their respective posts, stir the senses with insidious suggestions and imaginings. And the great fiend, their master, seizing the opportunity, would (inciting another willing slave by the equally ac-

cursed love of money) cause him to employ one of the many devices of which, alas! his poor victim was not even ignorant, so barefaced were they, to upset the firmly formed resolutions, and drag him once more, capering in senile folly, to the mouth of the yawning pit.

Managing to keep himself well informed as to the state of old Graham's finances, the publican in the neighbourhood would time it exactly that business required his presence in the vicinity. A few pleasant stories, and a drink or two out of the fatal bottle, invariably carried, proved sufficient — the bird was snared; the taste was in his mouth; he was booked. Or he would profess an anxiety to see him, in order that he might settle an account which left some trifling balance to the lost one's credit; or he would give a long price for a horse; or it was some miserable shallow pretext, through the flimsiness of which the unfortunate man could plainly detect the hellish dangers below, and yet which proved strong enough to cage his soul in iron bands.

Thus it ever happened to the poor old man. This time he had exercised a rigorous self-restraint. John had much compassion for him, and supported him to the utmost during his stay at Cambaranga; and old Graham even now, although no longer much in his company, looked upon him as a helper and adviser.

He had been his confidant in this last great effort. For two years the old man had carefully saved. Not a drop of the poison had during that period gone over his lips, and John actually believed that age had weakened the disease.

He was aware that the old overseer intended making a visit to his family, and he earnestly begged him to allow him to forward his savings, which amounted to nearly two hundred pounds (for Graham was enabled, by shrewd bargaining in horse-flesh, and strict economy, to amass yearly a large sum), to Sydney through the bank,—but no. The old fellow was obstinate on that point; he would put the money himself into his wife's hands, and telling her how he had borne it with him through the manifold temptations of the journey, he would beg her forgiveness with humility.

Accordingly he started, and the reader may imagine the pang it cost our hero when his eye fell on the reeling form of the old man, hiccupping out gleefully in his drunken idiocy, over and over the same two lines of a senseless ballad, his grey beard and shirt-front alike stained and wet with the deleterious compound spilt by his trembling hands.

John jumped on the verandah. Perhaps he thought he might find some one among the crowd who would take the old fellow away. He was well known and very popular in the district, and was instantly assailed

by a dozen different individuals, all clamorous to have a drink along with him.

"What are you going to drink, Mr West?"

"Come along, Mr West," another shouted; "I'm a-goin' to shout; what's yours?"

A third inebriated, long-legged, stockman-looking fellow, in boots and breeches, his cabbage-tree hat hanging far back on his head, lurched up, and with maudlin fun in his watery eyes, asked—

"Izay, yunkplo', avyou washyoneck jishmorn?"

John, who had much tact and good-humour when managing men under all circumstances, and never stood on his dignity foolishly, returned laughingly, feeling the part in question—

"I believe I have. Does it look particularly dirty?"

"Not s'hout'shide, yunkplo'; 'shin'shide, I meant. Comenave a b-b-b-ball."

Our hero was not a teetotaller, although a disapprover of the vice of drinking, and the men knew it. He was aware that most of them take a refusal as a direct personal insult; and accordingly, on the principle of doing in Rome as the Romans do, he agreed. "Drinks all round" are ordered for those in the room.

At the well-known sound, the two or three drunken dirty brutes surrounding old Graham came staggering in.

One of them shouting, "Belly up, boys! I'm in for

this good thing," made his way to the bar to be served along with the rest, when the shouter, who was an excellent manly fellow, although unhappily given to drink, and who despised all such loafers, roared out—

"Clearout 'shish yo —— sneaking, loafing dead-heads! Cantyoget'nuff oushat poo ole —— oushi?" Then turning to the barman he said, warningly, "Doncgo sherv nono shem spungin shentemin wimy-money, I shust warnyo."

The drink was scarcely down his throat when another rather bumptious and over-familiar style of man staggered up, pretending to be more drunk than he really was. "Issay, young un," he said (laying his dirty paws upon John), "will y'ave drink along o' me?"

John refused repeatedly. He didn't like the man or his impudent manner, and turned his back on him.

"You ——, you're too —— proud to drink with a poor man," shouted the enraged ruffian.

John, who was watching a drunken horseman forcing his steed up the steps on to the wooden verandah, on which the hoofs sounded like thunder, took no notice; but one of the crowd, turning roughly on the coarse blackguard, threatened to stuff his fist down his throat, and managed to quieten him, upon which he came up begging John's pardon, and entreating him once more to have a drink, which John once more refused.

All classes of labouring men crowded the building, singing and talking.

A small party of Cambaranga shepherds near John were discussing the merits of their dogs, and one of them had almost succeeded in silencing the rest, when an old grey-headed "superintendent of grass-cutters" an "old hand," broke in—

"Look hyar, matey. I don't call that 'ere dog o' yourn anything out o' the common, you know. Now I had a dog as was a dog. I had to take a small lot o' sheep once from Jeeburrina on the Darling, about three hundred miles away to another station, all by myself, you know, and I had the dog with me. Well, when I got within a hundred miles o' home, I goes on ahead, and by-and-by the dog brings home the monkeys. Well, mates, I counts 'em. There was two short. 'Spanker,' says I, 'where is the odd two, old man?' He looks at me and wags his blessed old tail, and away he slithers. In a day or two he comes back with a couple of sheepskins. *The beggar had killed them on the road for rations, and brought the skins to show it was all regular fair and square.*"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd. "Good for you, Yorkey."

"Have another drink, boys," says the chuckling old hand.

Old Graham had meantime staggered into the room,

and was vainly essaying to string a few words together consecutively, but the paralysed brain and swollen tongue refused their duty. He was quite aware of John's identity; but beyond that his reason refused to carry him.

Observing among the crowd one whom he knew to be a sober man, comparatively speaking, John drew him on one side, and asked if he could manage to get the overseer away, promising to reward him liberally.

"It's a difficult job," said the man. "He has been carrying on awful for the last ten days. I was doing a job of bush-work here, and I see'd him when he first come'd up. He wouldn't touch nothing; and the publican, he comes up and wishes him good-day, and talks so —— politeful to him, and asks if he mightn't have the pleasure of a drink in his company. And the old un, I could see, was burning inside; but he sez 'No! I'm agoin' home to my wife and kids this time,—first time for nigh on twelve years.'

"'Well,' sez the publican, 'here's success to the journey, and the missis, and the young ones;—you won't refuse that? I'll bring it out to you,—you needn't get off your horse,' he sez. And then he watched the poor old —— drain it up to the last drop, and kept him yarning until it commenced a-workin' on him, and by-and-by the old fool gets off, and hitches up his horse, and goes inside.

"Well, afore night, old Graham was as drunk as ever he was in his life; and I see'd him pulling out a handful of cheques, and heerd him a-sayin' to the publican, as he handed them across the bar, 'Take care o' my money for me.' How much it was, I dunno, but it looked a good bit; and since then he hasn't been sober for an hour together. He have been a-shoutin' shampain all round for days. He'll kill hisself this time, I do believe," continued the man. "He had a bad fit of the devils last night." John hereupon arranged that the speaker should endeavour to coax Graham away, and look after him, promising him a five-pound note should he succeed in getting him sober, and wages during the time spent in recovering him,—and with a heavy heart he left the den of death.

On finishing his business, and returning up the street, he fell in with the Barham Downs Super, walking, as usual, with his inseparable companion, the gentleman in charge of Bindarobina, and Dowlan. They were about visiting the Bindarobina horse, Sir Eustace; and on their invitation John proceeded with them to the stables.

Sir Eustace was in a large loose-box; and as his master undid the surcingle, and stripped the clothing off his beautiful form, he uttered a low whine of greeting, rubbing, at the same time, his soft velvet muzzle gently on the familiar shoulder. A more beautiful

horse never carried jock to victory; and as the by-standers gazed at him, the conviction was impressed upon them that he "looked a winner all over." He was of a bright bay colour, with a small spot of white on his forehead; standing a trifle lower in front than behind, with a grand shoulder and glorious propelling-power. His lean head bore gameness unmistakably stamped upon it.

"He's a knowing old rascal," said his doting master. "He knows quite well that he is going to race soon, and he loves it. We never require to muzzle him before the race-day. He is quite aware when the struggle is to come off, from having his racing-plates put on, getting his mane plaited, and doing no work the previous day; and he wouldn't touch a bite for anything. What a surpriser these Sydney fellows will get! They think nothing can touch their horse. I am going to send this fellow down to Randwick next spring."

John had no idea that the horse was really so good. He had heard much talk about him, but had set a great deal down to "blowing."

"How will your horse shape alongside, West?" asked the Bindarobina man.

"Well," returned the latter, "I certainly did not expect him to have to travel in such company, I confess; but although untried, he is, I think, a good horse, and a fast one too."

"Now I'll put you three up to something," said Sir Eustace's owner, confidentially. "We're all old friends; and you, Dowlan, I know, are backing the old horse. The fact is," he continued, looking around and lowering his voice, "this fellow has been doing the same distance every morning as that Sydney horse in a couple of seconds less time, with half a stone to spare on his back—for one of my men has a chum in their stable, and I can depend on what he says."

"By Jove!" ejaculated John, "it's lucky I'm not a betting man."

Dowlan shuddered inwardly as he thought how differently his book looked now. He felt that he had been too cunning, and had over-reached himself with a vengeance. Excusing himself on the plea of duty, he hurried off to find Ralf and Cane, in order to communicate to them what he had heard.

"Don't bother yourself," said the latter worthy; "I can put that all square."

"How do you mean?" asked the sub-inspector, anxiously.

"Did you never hear of a horse going wrong?"

"Oh yes—but——"

"But I suppose you would rather lose your money than not," sneered the other.

"I don't see what is to be done."

"I'll tell you what you can do. It's customary, is

it not, to station one of your men on duty at the stables the night before the races?"

"It is."

"Well, haven't you got some duffer or drunken devil you can put there to-morrow night, and leave the rest to me?"

Dowlan hesitated. He was not afraid of doing so, but he feared the consequences. Supposing anything went wrong, and his share was discovered; but then, supposing he lost his bets. It was now too late to hedge.

"Well," he answered, "mind, I know nothing; but I'll manage that for you."

So they parted. John returned to his quarters at the hospitable station, where fun and jollity were the order of the day and night. The floor of the wool-shed had been swept clean, and the walls hung with rugs and blankets of various gay colours. Numbers of lamps occupied every available position. These were improvised for the occasion, and really looked elegant. A wide-mouthed French prune-jar of clear glass, half full of bright water, formed the stand; down the mouth of this was inserted the neck of an inverted clear glass whisky-bottle, which had been cut through the middle, and a wire fixed in the cork, which still remained in the whisky-bottle, served to sustain a wick. The inverted half of the whisky-

bottle was partly filled with water and partly with strained liquid fat, which of course floated on the water and encompassed the wick. Here the whole party assembled after dinner and danced to the music of an accordion, flute, and violin, the players being members of the orchestra band, hired by the race-ball committee to perform at the great gathering next evening.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable affair, especially for the ladies, who, being much fewer in number than the gentlemen, were consequently in great request. Even the young damsels of eleven and twelve years were eagerly sought after as partners, and picked and chose among their suitors with a discriminating dignity worthy of London *belles*. Old and young, not even excepting Mrs Gray, and their kind though immensely stout hostess,—none of them missed a dance; until the orchestra, fairly overcome with the joint fatigues of eating, drinking, and performing, declared that they must reserve their energies for the following evening.

The next day was spent in a somewhat similar manner to the former one by the men. The ladies, however, had much mysterious confabulation together about dresses, &c. Little knots of them were clustered here and there, discussing matters, or busily at work, until lunch-time; after which, some on horseback and others in buggies, they made their way into

the township, where they settled themselves according to invitation, at various friends' houses, or at hotels, to prepare for the ball.

This being the only event of the kind held in the district, and its occurrence being only once a-year, it naturally caused great excitement. For months in advance it was anticipated, and dresses were discussed and prepared by the fair devotees of Terpsichore; and for months afterwards it served them as a theme of conversation. All the ladies of the neighbourhood attended it, as well as those of the town. It was unfortunately quite impossible to keep the assembly as select as the more aristocratic of the female portion of the community would have wished, on account of their small number as compared with that of the gentlemen; and the success of the affair depending upon the largeness of the attendance, it was arranged that, as usual, one portion of the hall of the court-house in which it was held should be reserved for the "nobs," and the other part for the public generally. Still a line had to be drawn. Discrimination had to be shown somewhere. A number of Chinamen who had induced white women to participate in their joys and sorrows, had settled in the little town, and the committee were sternly severe in refusing to issue cards to the mottled population.

The much-longed-for hour arrived at last. The

ladies were dressed with considerable taste, but much diversity existed in the gentlemen's toilets. Some, indeed, appeared in rigorous black; there was also a uniform or two, the resplendent owners of which never failed to secure partners; but others there were who, not having visited town for some years, had long forsworn the ceremonial evening attire, and, unwilling to miss the fun, came in white. All, however, enjoyed themselves greatly. The bar-girls, bullock-drivers' wives, and servants, kept themselves at the lower end of the room, where perhaps the dancing was of a more vigorous and less ceremonious character than that which characterised the other part, still the utmost decorum prevailed; and although some irritation was excited among the more select, owing to the desertion of two or three gentlemen who, after supper, sought relief from the conventionalities of high life among the less fastidious classes, yet everything, on the whole, went off with much success, and the Yering race-ball and its incidents were the subject of many a fair head's thoughts as it sought its pillow for long afterwards.

John left earlier than the rest to attend to his horse. He had not much hope of securing the Yering Cup since his visit to Sir Eustace, but he nevertheless looked forward to a fair chance for the Maiden Plate.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RACE — OLD GRAHAM'S FATE.

HE was astir early, and after effecting his arrangements, rode into town, followed by Tommy, leading Emin Bey in clothing.

Yering wore its gayest dress. Every one seemed on the spree; and from an early hour saddled horses in groups were hitched up to every door, or stood in stock-yards awaiting their riders.

John went straight through to the race-course, which lay about two miles out of town on the other side, and soon the Bey was accommodated with a stall in the shed which ran around the saddling-paddock, among a crowd of others, closely attended by Tommy.

Rumours were flying about that the Bindarobina horse had broken down, but as yet nobody could tell anything with certainty.

Horses in clothing were being led up and down, or ridden gently by young lads, who strove hard to assume a knowing turfy look. A few of the most

enthusiastic sporting men were here and there discussing the qualities of the various competitors, or scrutinising their appearance, or endeavouring to pick up the latest intelligence about them.

Presently the grand stand began to fill, and rumour resolves itself into certainty. Sir Eustace is unfit to run. Gone in one of his feet. Nobody knows exactly what it is. Supposed to have had a sudden strain, or given himself a knock. What a pity, thinks John, that such a noble creature should be crippled! however, it gives him a better chance, and he may yet win the Cup himself.

By-and-by the inhabitants of Yering stream out in a long line,—mostly on horseback, some in buggies, and a few on foot. Who would have believed that there were so many in the little place? Even the blacks are dressed out, for the nonce, in battered old hats, and tattered old garments, and hasten to join in the "white-fellows'" holiday.

Mr Gray's party have arrived in a buggy, and Bessie is wild with excitement. Phœbe also feels enthusiasm welling up within her; and although, for reasons best known to herself, she does not, like Bessie, wear Fitzgerald's colours—magenta and buff—she is quite as anxious about the Bey's success. Stone is now down in the saddling-paddock talking with John or some other of his friends; now at Bessie's side

giving her information, and taking a manly pride in proclaiming to the assembled multitude the tender relationship about to exist between them.

Dowlan, who is extremely vain, takes advantage of his duty as policeman to display himself to the public, and moves about on a capering horse, smirking to the rich, and growling at the poor. The Clerk of Petty Sessions officiates as Clerk of the Course. He is not much of a sportsman, and he can barely hold on to his quiet cob; but he loves to attire himself once a-year in his red coat, velvet cap, boots, and breeches. This is his gala-day; he has no other opportunity of displaying his glories: during the rest of the year he has to content himself with occasionally donning the scarlet in his own room at night, when Yering is steeped in slumber. As he jogs past, with his toes turned out, and his elbows looking like the handles of a pitcher, his "military" seat is the theme of much jocular comment.

The upright old police magistrate, a very distinguished retired officer, is judge. The stewards bustle about with much importance.

Many of the swell-mob have found their road to this out-of-the-way meeting; and some members of the ring make themselves conspicuous, as, surrounded by a circle of constituents, note-book and pencil in hand, they shout the odds,—Two to one bar one!

Two to one bar one! Take the field bar one!—and so on, in their rapid jargon. Nor have the book-makers alone journeyed up to the carcass. Other birds of prey, in the shape of roulette-table owners, thimble-riggers, card-swindlers, and the host of other thieves who ply their calling on the various courses, are busily at work. A few of the fair sex, attended by their cavaliers, have a spurt round the course; a drunken bushman gets a spill off his horse before the crowd, near the grand stand, and is carried away with a broken collar-bone.

The Yering lawyer, who is by no means a popular individual, drives up the course in his new buggy. He leaves the horses standing in front of the grand stand, while he renews an old-standing acquaintance with "Mr Jas. Hennessey's battle-axe;" but the horses, frightened by the unaccustomed noise, move off. Now they trot. The lawyer rushes out bare-headed, with his tumbler in his hand, shouting to the people to stop them, but no one puts out a hand. Now they canter, with the reins trailing. In vain he runs holloaing; they break into a gallop, which grows into desperate speed. They come to a hurdle. The crowd cheer, and roar out "Over." They take the sticks together in gallant style; but the buggy, smashed to atoms, remains on the other side, and away they go with the pole between them.

Hurray! its only the lawyer's trap. Now a bell rings, and the jocks, with their saddles, &c., over their arms, get weighed; the horses are saddled, and the boys mounted. Once more the bell rings. Now they are led out. Look, there goes one! How the green-and-gold silk jacket shivers as the horse rushes past in his preparatory canter! Here's another. "Oh, what a darling of a horse!" cries Bessie, as a beautiful chestnut filly tears past, ridden by a tiny-looking child in pink and silver. Now some more go to the post. Now they are marshalled. The starter lowers his flag. Off! Away they fly,—there they speed altogether. At last they round the corner and come up the straight. The tiny boy, sitting well down, his hands low, occasionally glances warily over his shoulder at his nearest rival, whose horse's head, extended to its utmost, cannot draw up farther than the handsome chestnut's girth. Hark! how the hoofs thunder for a moment as they fly past!

Hurrah! Cheers. A general relief; and as the chestnut with her rider is led a winner past the grand stand, Bessie feels inclined to run down and kiss the child.

"You're better where you are," gravely returns Stone. "He's a perfect young imp."

Now the excitement increases. The Maiden Plate

is to be run for. Tommy's youngest brother, Dick, a knowing, cool little fellow, is to steer the Bey to victory if possible; and many an injunction he receives from his big brother, which he faithfully promises to observe.

The weighing is over; the little mite of a saddle is girthed on, its white web bands showing distinctly against the glossy black satin skin. Now the boy is lifted on; and John leads his horse down the course a little, watched by more than one pair of bright eyes, who take an interest in the creature for his master's sake. There he rushes past. "That's the Ungahrun horse—that's Emin Bey," is heard on all sides; and clannish Ungahrun stockmen offer to back him for all they are worth.

Ralf and Cane are also there. They do not intend to race their horse until the morrow, and are engaged at present with their books. Presently Ralf catches sight of Tommy, whom he recognises as a servant of Fitzgerald's, and a memory comes across him. He surely knows that black horse also. He remembers him when a colt, and gets deeply interested. A sinking, foreboding feeling of evil steals over him. He has laid heavily against Emin Bey, chiefly from a feeling of dislike to Fitzgerald.

Listen! The race is an exciting one. "Emin Bey!" "Tropic!" "Antoinette!" "Emin Bey!"

"Tropic!" "Emin Bey!" "Emin Bey!" "Emin B-e-e-e-y!" Here they come! The Ungahrun horse has freed himself from his antagonists, and wins in a canter, hard held.

Much acclamation is heard on all sides, and the Ungahrun men are jubilant over the victory of the station horse. Tommy busies himself in rubbing the Bey down, and leads him off home. The Betyammo party are in high spirits, and John is congratulated many times. A few more races are run, and all return to town. The road is a long string of galloping horses — all the Yering fair sex, like most of their sisters in Australia, caring nothing for any other pace. The buggies drive swiftly home, each escorted by two or three sportsmen.

John had observed Sir Eustace's owner and the Barham Downs Super on the course, but he had then no leisure to inquire about the horse's accident. As he now rides up to the stable there is a small crowd round it. The groom is declaiming violently against some person or persons unknown: he is of opinion that his horse has been wilfully hurt, and various opinions are expressed. No one knows exactly what is wrong. It is a hurt in the foot. The noble creature lifts his foot for each one to examine it. He is shorn of his glory. How changed he looks with his piteous expression and his foot held up, shrinking from the

smallest touch, from the form which he showed the day before—gallant, bold, and reckless!

"Something seems to have penetrated the foot in a downward direction from the coronet," says John; but he cannot detect an orifice or a drop of blood, yet the hoof is extremely sensitive. It is quite clear that he cannot race to-morrow; if so, and the Sydney horse wins, more money will change hands than has done so on Yering course for many a year.

John rides back to more merry-making; round games are being played, in the soft bright moonlight, on the thick sward. An impromptu dance is got up by some insatiable spirits who are not knocked up with previous exertions, but the turf is scarcely springy enough, and vocal music is tried instead.

John awoke next morning in a state of much anxious excitement. He found that the hopes of his district rested upon the Bey as a last resource, for so firm a favourite was Sir Eustace, that Ralf and Cane got any odds they chose against their horse. Tommy, on the contrary, was perfectly calm. He was quite aware what was to be done, and he felt convinced that the Bey had the right stuff in him. He was indeed so great a believer in the animal, that he would willingly have become a martyr at the stake for the sincerity of his opinion.

The day wore on; the first few races had been run, and now the grand event of the meeting is going to come off—but under very different circumstances to what was expected. It is now almost a foregone conclusion, and ruefully does many a one think of the emptiness which will fill his pocket presently. Besides which, they hate being cleaned out by these Sydney turfites, with their bumptious self-assertion. The Bindarobina man and his friend assist John and Tommy as far as they are able; and if good wishes could make his horse win, theirs would soon enable him to distance all competitors.

The Sydney crack, Errol, a fine golden-brown horse, the picture of a racer, is being attended to by a party of horsey cads, who pique themselves on their knowledge of town racing, as compared with this bush affair.

The bell rings—the jocks are weighed; and as it rings again, they make their way to the post. Dick, who has unlimited faith in himself and his horse, sets his face like cast-iron,—he is resolute to uphold the credit of the district. Several other horses are to start also, but none of them have a chance. Errol is a steady, quiet-tempered horse, too honest for the crew who own him. He is ready to start at the word; but Cane knows that Emin Bey's temper is an irritable, nervous one, and his jockey has received instructions to make

a false start or two if he can. The Bey is unaccustomed to being checked in this way, and rears the first time in a manner perfectly appalling to behold, while Tommy grinds his teeth and swears inwardly.

The Betyammo party are once more in the grand stand, and the enthusiasm has increased to the highest pitch. Old Mr Gray would sooner than a hundred pounds that the Sydney horse should be beaten. Bessie is breathless, and Phœbe says nothing; but her face is white. The Sydney men make sneering remarks as they stand in a little group, feeling secure of victory.

Off! Away they go at last, on the wings of the wind, with the noise of the whirlwind! They are past. Dead silence reigns.

It is not reality. We are looking at one of the great paintings of the turf. The same scene,—the horses stretched to their utmost, the many-coloured jockeys standing up in their stirrups, their backs bent, their heads low. It seems an age until they turn the far corner. Two are now racing side by side,—the rest are away behind, yet still holding on at their best speed. Now a murmur is heard, and it increases into excited shouts as each second varies the fortunes of the race. The horses are so close together, no one can tell which has the advantage. Roars of encouragement from the backers of both greet the riders. Errol's jock calls upon his horse as he passes the grand stand,

and making a determined spurt, the generous steed succeeds in getting a head's length in front of Emin Bey, but only for an instant.

Dick feels what his horse is capable of, and, pulling him together, wakens him up for a final effort, and lands him a victor by a short neck, amid deafening applause from the excited crowd, who toss their hats and helmets into the air and kick them about, shake hands with each other, and cheer as if each one had attained the wish his heart most desired.

Dick receives a perfect ovation as he is led back bareheaded to the scales; and Bessie finds, to her astonishment, in the midst of her smiles, that her face is quite wet; while Phœbe, so pale a minute before, is now as red as any rose. Not less delighted and excited is John, who has his hand nearly wrung off by numerous enthusiastic individuals, who at this moment are ready to devote their lives and fortunes towards sustaining the honour of the district. Tommy takes things more coolly,—he asks a question or two of Dick, and leads the Bey off to be thoroughly strapped and clothed; but to-night in the stables he will throw his arms round his beauty's neck, and whisper loving words to him, as he makes up his bed with rather more than usual care, in grateful memory of his achievements. Cane is furious.

The race has been so fairly run that there is no

chance of protesting against the decision of the judge; and cursing his horse and its rider, his ill luck, and himself and companion, he seeks consolation in the bottle, assisted by Ralf, who is reduced to despair. He is overwhelmed with the amount of calamity which he feels impending, and the bitterness of defeat has to him an additional poignancy when he thinks of the impending exposure of his frauds in Sydney.

Dowlan as usual has joined the winning side. He has no fear that his share in Sir Eustace's business will come to light, but he has been mixed up in other underhand manœuvres, and he has to crawl through slime, and lie and fawn into the good graces of those to whom his greed and foiled schemes have made him a debtor. He must endeavour to work through somehow, and already he has told a number of stories discreditable to his former associates, placing himself in the light of a victim.

The Barham Downs and Bindarobina men are almost better pleased than if the race had turned out as they had anticipated. Emin Bey's victory has saved them each more money than they could well afford to lose; and as John rides into Yering, they join Mr Gray and Stone and the old honest Oorgootoolah squatter in cheering him loudly. But alas! his pleasure is not unalloyed, for he is informed by the man who has

undertaken to look after old Graham, that his charge has been missing since the morning previous.

The old overseer had been seized with a dreadful attack of *delirium tremens* on the evening when John had seen him, and was with much difficulty kept in the house during the night. Towards morning he had grown quieter, and his guardian had left the house in which he was for a short time, to find on his return that the old man was gone. Whither? No one knew. He had searched during the day himself, and having got bushed in the intricacies of a scrub into which the tracks of the missing man had led him, he was unable to report the occurrence sooner.

The police magistrate at once despatched a couple of white constables, with a black tracker, to trace the footsteps from the place where they had last been seen.

John rode home with a depressed mind. As he passed the public-house which had proved "the lion in the old man's path," he saw the publican, a bloated, greasy-faced man, with a villanous, low forehead, and a prize-fighting look, walking up and down the verandah in a "boiled shirt" (old Graham had worn flannel since he left his married home), snowy-white trousers, and carpet slippers, his waist girded with a scarlet sash, narrating with coarse glee to a fellow-poisoner how he had "copped the old —— on the hop," and "lambed him down to rights."

The bar was still thronged, and the effects of the mixture of spirits of wine, blue-stone, and tobacco-juice, were to be seen on a miserable wretch who lay stretched in the courtyard, among a heap of broken bottles, empty sardine-tins, and smashed-up boxes.

"I'd like to have the punishing of you," thought our hero. "I'd make you drink a tumblerful of the dregs of one of your own casks every day for a week."

Next morning, on riding into the township to inquire for the poor old man, he found the police magistrate and one or two justices of the peace about starting to hold a magisterial inquiry on his body. He had been found late the night previous, lying perfectly dead in a small gully in the scrub.

John joined the others, and was horror-struck at the sight which presented itself on reaching the place. Graham had evidently been dead nearly two days. He lay on his back, swelled to twice his natural size, his legs and arms drawn up tightly to his body, one hand clenching a butcher's knife. His eyes glared awfully. His mouth was open, out of which protruded a swollen tongue, the centre of a thick mass of crawling, creeping, burrowing, white maggots, some of which occasionally tumbled over the swollen blue lips, and rolled along the long grey beard. On opening his shirt a similarly disgusting sight was to be observed,—hatfuls of the hateful creatures were to be

seen under his arms, while millions of fearful-looking flies buzzed around him. About his neck, a cord, to which was suspended a small bag, cut deeply into the swollen flesh. This, on being opened, was found to contain, wrapped in numerous folds of paper and oilskin, three or four locks of light-brown hair, and one long tress of a darker shade.

Alas, poor Graham! the adder that stung thee was of thine own fostering.

Owing to the decomposed state of the body, no further examination was effected, and the inquiry came to an end, all being satisfied that drink alone had brought about the dreadful results.

Another piece of intelligence was made public during the day. On applying poultices to Sir Eustace's wounded foot, the broken end of a strong darning-needle was discovered and extracted, upon which the animal became very much easier. Suspicion pointed to the Sydney men, but nothing was certain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

EVIL COUNSEL AND EVIL DEEDS—M'DUFF'S DEATH.

THE next day saw Yering deserted of its visitors. Almost all the station people wended their ways homeward, and only a few of the labouring classes remained to spend the small remnant of money which they still possessed.

How Cane and Ralf staved off the most pressing of their creditors' demands, they themselves only knew. The horse had been seized at the instance of the hotel-keeper with whom they boarded, and they had apparently nothing to go upon except the position of Ralf's father, which procured for them some credit in the way of food and drink. This morning, they sat together over a bottle of brandy, to which both, especially Cane, had frequent recourse.

"Well," said Ralf, sulkily, "you have managed to get us into a nice mess."

"Shut up, you growling ——. You're the biggest sneak hi hever comed hacross. You halways turns

round hon yer mates when things don't go just right," returned his amiable friend.

"No wonder!" answered the latter; "you make yourself out so —— knowing, and you let a —— bush-horse quietly walk off with stakes big enough to put us on our legs again, without bets. I wouldn't have cared so much if it hadn't belonged to that —— stuck-up Fitzgerald."

"D—— him!" echoed the other. "Hi'd sooner hit 'ad been 'im than that hother cussed pup whot hi saw a-lookin' hafter 'im. Hi'll settle that ——'s 'ash yet, hif hi gets 'alf a slant,—hi will, s'elp me, for the sake hof this business."

"Bosh!—you're always skyting about what you'll do. What can you do now, when we want some good advice? That's more to the purpose——"

"Can't you get that 'ere —— hold M'Duff to lend you some cash?" asked Cane.

"He'd sooner give me his blood," returned Ralf; "besides, this forgery business is blown all over the country by this time, and people will be shy of taking his cheques."

"Didn't you say has 'ow a diggin's butcher wos a comin' there to buy sheep?"

"By Jove," uttered Ralf, a new light breaking in upon him, "we might get any amount of gold, if we could lay our hands on it! Those fellows nearly always pay in pure metal."

"You sed has 'ow the hold boy was agoin' down to Sydney habout them 'ere forged flimsies. Hif we could get 'old of 'is valise, we might put that little business to rights too; burn them, hand square hourselves with the gold for a fresh start hin Sydney."

"Right you are," returned Ralf, admiringly; "you have got a brain. I believe it's easy enough done."

"Hof course hit is. We'll cut away there. Hi'll camp hin the bush. You stay hup hat the 'ouse,—find hout 'is plans, and get 'old of the valise, 'and it hover to me, hand hi'll stow hit away hall serene."

Accordingly, they both started for Cambaranga. Ralf, who had an intimate knowledge of the country around the station, pointed out a place to Cane, in close proximity to the head-station, where he might remain camped for some time in secrecy, and then made his own way to the house.

It was dark when he arrived. Mr M'Duff was at home, as well as a young man who had been engaged to fill the position of overseer vacated by old Graham. M'Duff was by no means in a good humour. Whether he suspected Ralf as the thief who was preying on what he worked so hard for, and loved so much, or whether it was that he merely disliked and despised the character of the young man, was hard to say. His manner was more than usually stern and gruff. The news of old Graham's death did not seem to affect

him much. He knew his worth, and appreciated his good qualities; but he had expected the catastrophe so long, that it was by no means a shock. His mind was much more disturbed about the forgeries which had interfered with the currency of his cheques; and he produced one after another, which had been sent up for his inspection, until Ralf saw all the evidences of his crime before him on the table. If he could only get possession of them!

In the course of the evening he learnt that M'Duff intended starting for Sydney next day, to give personal evidence in the affair, which he was determined to investigate thoroughly. The butcher from the gold-fields had come, and only left that morning; therefore his gold must still be in the house.

If Ralf could only lay his hand on that valise, he would never get into such a scrape again,—never, never!

He could not listen to what M'Duff said, so busy was he planning his measures. At last it was bedtime, and all retired to their rooms; but Ralf cannot sleep, —he sits and ponders. After a couple of hours' time, he slips off his boots, and makes his way over to the house in which M'Duff sleeps. The superintendent's heavy measured breathing is heard from the bed. Where can he have put his papers and the gold? He intends starting early; he has surely packed his valise.

It is so dark he knocks against a chair slightly, and M'Duff's quick ear warns him. He opens his eyes. "Who is there?" he asks, in his stern, deep voice. Ralf is close to the door—he steps out, and hastening over to his room, jumps into bed, and draws the blankets over him as he is. Presently he notices a light; and M'Duff walks across the courtyard, comes straight to his room, and looks in through the open door. Ralf is breathing hard in apparently sound sleep, and the superintendent goes away satisfied to the other man's room, and then walks back to his own. Ralf dares not try it again. He lies for an hour or two revolving plans, and decides on consulting Cane. Accordingly, he made his way out to the spot where that worthy was camped. It was about half a mile distant, in a small patch of rocky, broken country, beside a little spring; and awakening him, he narrated what he had learnt.

"Hit's hall no —— use," remarked Cane, on learning full particulars. "The hold fellow 'as got hevery-think stowed haway, so has yer can't lays yer 'ands hon it. I votes we stick 'im hup hon the road."

Ralf frightened. "Robbery!" he said.

"Robbery!" sneered the other, mimicking the tone. "Wot was yer about to-night, eh? Don't be a —— fool now, and spile hall. Find hout which way he means to take, hand come 'ere immediately hafter, and

we'll manage some'ow. Now get halong back before ye're missed."

With this they parted, and Ralf had a good hour in bed before daylight broke. M'Duff was up early, and had his horse ready. Ralf, to blind him to the real state of affairs, pretended laziness, and came in late to breakfast, keeping his eyes and ears open all the time. M'Duff tells his last night's adventure, and persists in believing some one was in his room. The new overseer laughs loudly, much to M'Duff's disgust, for he is not given to creating false alarms. He informs them that he is going down the "mailman's old track," which will save him twenty miles in the journey. Ralf knows it well. It is a narrow bridle-path, leading partly through thick scrubby country, and partly over mountains. Here and there the track is very indistinct, and in some places there is none. It is only known to the older station hands, and is seldom traversed now, although formerly the mailman used it; but his route is now changed. M'Duff knows it well also. It would take him a day and a half by the main road to accomplish what he can do by this path in one. He brings out his valise. Ralf thinks it looks heavy. M'Duff straps it on, and mounting, nods a hasty good-bye, and is off. Ralf is on tenter-hooks to go to Cane, but the overseer is in the way. The man is polite to his employer's son, and would

like to become acquainted with him, and therefore delays his business to indulge in a chat. But Ralf's gruff, uncivil answers drive him off; and catching his horse, the sociable young fellow goes away whistling.

Ralf now gets his horse also, and is soon detailing his knowledge to Cane, who, without a word, straps his few effects on the horse which he has already saddled.

"Come hon," he said. "Lead the way hon to the track, hand push halong, hif yer don't want to miss yer last chance."

A roundabout way brought them to the "mailman's track," and soon they were cantering along it in silence, glancing eagerly ahead of them for their prey. As they hurry on, Cane explains his plan to Ralf. They were both provided with revolvers, which many people in the bush carry. These they slung in their belts, to give them the appearance of bushrangers, while a red handkerchief apiece, in which holes had been cut for their eyes, was a sufficient disguise. Their clothes were in no wise different from those of fifty others, and they feared not being recognised. They hurried on faster,—they are now about eighteen miles from home, and expect to see the quarry every minute. At last they notice him about a couple of hundred yards ahead, as he leaves a small open space to enter some timber.

Cane now takes the lead; he hunts now by sight. Making a detour to get in front, and whispering fiercely to Ralf that, "should he fail to stick by him," he "will never see another day's light," he rushes out on the unsuspecting man. "Bail up! bail up!" shout the two red-veiled attackers, revolvers in hand. "Throw hup yer harms, or hi'll drop yer!" shouts Cane, intimidatingly.

But M'Duff is not to be got so easily; and hitting his horse with the spurs, he tears along shouting "Never!" and brandishing his stout hunting-crop. Both men gallop alongside, threatening his life once more; and perhaps the determination of the Super might have caused them to give up the attempt, had not Ralf's handkerchief fallen off. M'Duff turning at the time, recognised him, and uttering his name in fierce tones, as he struck about him wildly with his whip, vowed that he should hang for the attempt on his life.

"Shoot him, Ralf!" cries Cane. "Shoot the hold ——, or he'll 'ave yer blood."

Ralf's trembling fingers might have obeyed the fearful command, when a smashing blow from the hunting-crop knocked the revolver out of his hand, and saved him the commission of the dreadful crime. But in the same moment "crack" goes one of the chambers of Cane's six-shooter; and he has rivalled his great namesake and antitype, the first murderer.

The grim, money-loving old Super—so firm and fair in some things—so heartless and lax in others—falls from his saddle. His foot getting entangled in the stirrup-iron, the body is dragged along by the frantic horse, striking against stumps and roots, and being kicked at furiously by the animal, against whose hind-legs it is occasionally dashed with violence. The road is strewn with little articles belonging to the unfortunate man. His helmet lies at the spot where the shot was fired, his whip farther on, then his knife and matches, and then some plugs of tobacco; a little farther lies scattered some money, then clots of blood,—and a mark of the trailing body runs all along the road.

Cane and Ralf were at first seriously alarmed lest the animal should become maddened with fear and make its escape, valise and all; but the stirrup-leather comes off, and the body falls to the ground. Soon after, they succeed in catching the frightened steed, and lead him back snorting to where its master lies a pitiful sight, with his grizzly hair and beard a thick mass of dust and blood, his face almost undistinguishable with bruises. Twenty minutes before, he was in full vigour, his mind occupied with plans for his earthly welfare; and now his spirit, that "wandering fire," has joined old Graham's in pioneering the "dark, undiscovered shore" of that black river from which no explorer's report has ever been received.

With eager haste they tear off the valise and examine the contents. They pull out handkerchiefs and collars, a couple of shirts, and some other articles of clothing, a cheque-book, some papers (only accounts). What! no money! none of the hated forged cheques!

"Examine his pockets," says Cane.

Ralf shrinks from touching the fearful thing.

"Curse your white liver!" snarls the red-handed man, fit for any deed now,—and, bending down, he turns out pocket after pocket. Nothing! (Indeed, M'Duff had made up the post-bag before leaving, into which he had put the forged cheques, as well as the crossed cheque which he had received from the "diggings" butcher, and by this time the mailman was hastening with them along another road down to town.) In his rage he vents his resentment by kicking the helpless clay, saying, "You put me hout hall night in the bush wonst—hit's your turn now."

Ralf is getting stupefied; he is only now waking up to what has occurred.

"Come halong, you fool!" shouts the chief villain; "let's get the carcass hout o' this some'ow, hand then we'll see wot's to be done."

A couple of deep round lagoons lay alongside of the track; and half carrying, half dragging the body between them, they threw it into the black water on the far side from the road. The water splashed and surged

in widening circles, wetting their feet as they stood on the banks. What a relief to get rid of that evidence of guilt—motionless, inanimate, but more terrible than any living witness! The valise and saddle weighted with stones, are likewise flung into the pool, and every evidence of the crime is carefully hidden from sight.

And now Cane, whose mind seems to have grown clearer and stronger with the emergency, gives instructions to the trembling wretch beside him as to what must be done. They had passed some miles back a small gunyah and yard temporarily occupied by a flock of "hospital" sheep, shepherded by an old black gin.

Cane, alive to the urgent necessity of obliterating all tracks, orders Ralf to go to the place and cause the old woman, who knows him, and is likely to obey his orders without hesitation, to drive her sheep out here for a night, and camp near the water-hole. He is aware that the tracks of the sheep on the road will hide the footprints of the galloping horses and the trailing of the body, and that as they crowd round the margin of the lagoon in their anxiety to drink, all marks there will be effaced. He impresses the necessity on Ralf of getting home quickly and unobservedly, and of examining all M'Duff's papers. He himself will cross the bush and make for another station

at some considerable distance off, so that he may establish an *alibi* if necessary; and in two or three days' time he will return to the camp where he spent the previous night. Ralf can meet him there.

Now that M'Duff is out of the way, Ralf will have charge, and can easily put matters right as regards business. But first of all, they must set this straight.

After undergoing much advising, threatening, imploring, and sneering, Ralf is ready to start. Cane then parted with him, taking the murdered man's horse, which he has decided to shoot in the first thick scrub he comes to at a sufficient distance from the spot.

Ralf rode as one in a dream. He succeeded in finding the sheep, and, making some excuse, he started the half-crazed old woman with them to the lagoons. Then he galloped home half frenzied with fear, his mind dwelling on the tragedy he had so lately borne a part in. The young overseer had not returned, and Ralf breathes more freely as he turned his horse into the paddock and sought his room. There was something clinging to him which he could not shake off. Go where he would, something awful there was at his elbow—a fearful load on his soul! Outwardly he was the same as this morning, but inwardly—— An indefinable terror haunted him. He threw himself on his bed. "O God! O God! O God!" He started as he uttered the holy name. What had he done?

The whiteness of his soul had long, long ago been smudged with black dirt; and now, after years of absence, on the same ground he had changed its colour to a brighter hue, but a darker stain. The overseer rode up merrily. A happy, careless lad, he strode in with a cheery remark, but suddenly stopping, asked if Ralf was ill.

"Only a bad headache," he was answered. "I'm often like this." He could eat nothing. That night, when all was silent, he stole over to the dead man's chamber. How he abhorred the cursed money! Sooner a thousand times over would he have appeared before the world as a defaulter, or as a thief, than as he now was; yet it must be done. Each article put him in mind of his victim. Guiltily he glanced over his shoulder, fancying that he heard stealthy footsteps, or that a voice whispered something in his ear. Nothing could he find. No money—no cheques; nothing of any value. And the deed had been done uselessly —uselessly. O God! what is that on the bed? An indistinct form shapes itself. He almost faints. Tush! it is only the washing, which the woman has laid out there. Back to his room, where, amid incoherent ravings and agonies of mind, he passed the rest of that awful night. He wished Cane would return. He wanted to look once more on the *spot*, to see that all was right; but he dared not. What if the old gin,

with the sharp eyes her race is celebrated for, has detected the tracks? Her instinctive sagacity would enable her to follow up the clue. All the day succeeding, and the night which followed, and the day after, Ralf remained in a state of mind bordering on insanity. The overseer and woman in the kitchen, indeed, began to suspect that the brandy which he had procured from M'Duff's store, and which he drank in immense quantities, was about to produce a fit of horrors; but, strange to say, it had no effect whatever on his agitated system. The day was now at hand when Cane promised to return to the rendezvous, and Ralf counted every minute until his stronger-minded associate should assist him in bearing a share of the oppressing secret.

That evening a horseman was announced approaching; and Ralf, concluding that Cane had changed his intentions, and had decided upon staying at the house, ran out to meet him. It was not Cane, however, but Ralf's father, Mr Cosgrove, sen. He had, in consequence of the unsatisfactory information which had reached him, started out from home very suddenly; and leaving Ruth in Sydney, where he had received further disquieting intelligence, he had continued his journey to Cambaranga, to confer with M'Duff about the very business which was taking the latter to New South Wales, unknown to his employer and partner.

The unexpected face fell cold upon the guilty heart; but there was something in old associations and blood which, notwithstanding all his weight of guilt, gave to him some measure of comfort. He felt a desire to cling to his father; he felt that there stood the only one who would seek to palliate his wickedness, if possible. His subdued and quiet manner, so different to what his father had ever before noticed in him, struck the elder Cosgrove very much; and he felt that perhaps the young man had seen the folly of his doings, and was about to change.

He met him with a greater show of affection than he had bestowed on the prodigal for some years, and asked for M'Duff.

It was well for Ralf that the young overseer came out just then to answer the question, for he only kept himself from falling by clinging to the paddock-fence. Cosgrove's annoyance at having missed the Super was expressed rather loudly, and the bustle of unsaddling the horse served to divert attention from Ralf, who managed to get inside the house, where he fortified himself by drinking a large quantity of brandy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FEARFUL JOURNEY—HIDING GUILT.

THE activity and excitement consequent on the arrival of Mr Cosgrove relieved Ralf from much observation, and to a certain extent relaxed the strain on his mind. His father's conversation, however, was full of poignant bitterness; and the arrows of remorse fell fast upon him as the elder Cosgrove seemed willing to forget all the old grievances and errors of the past. He would possibly even have hushed up his son's forging transactions, and paid his debts once more, had he made an open confession, and determined to lead a new life; but now there was an impassable gulf fixed between him and ordinary men.

The past life *was* over. A new life had begun. Never again would men take him by the hand and welcome him to their homes. Henceforth he was worse than a pariah—he was a wild beast. As these thoughts kept crossing his mind, a groan, occasioned

by his mental distress, would now and then burst from him; and at last, excusing himself on the plea of illness, he again sought his room, to pass another wretched night.

At breakfast next morning he received a still greater shock, for Mr Cosgrove, speaking of his journey, incidentally remarked, "By the way, I came along the mailman's track yesterday. They wanted to dissuade me from doing so at the other end, for they feared I could not find my way after my long absence; and as I passed the Lilly Lagoon, I fancied I saw something in the water like a dead body."

"A dead body!" laughed the overseer.

"Yes," said Mr Cosgrove. "I did not go close to it. It was something dead, I am sure."

Ralf said nothing; he was pale and rigid, his fingers stiff and cold, his hair rising on his head, his heart beating violently.

"It might have been a sheep, or a kangaroo, or perhaps a calf," suggested the overseer.

"Ah, yes," joined in Ralf—"a calf, no doubt; there are plenty of wild cattle in the scrubs there."

The conversation changed; but his nerves were wrung worse than ever.

Twice he went to the rendezvous, but it was vacant. How he longed for Cane! He even prayed that he might come. His father, noticing his careworn, hag-

gard look, felt alarmed, and proposed sending for a doctor. To this, however, Ralf vehemently objected.

On going the third time, about sundown, to the meeting-place, he saw his brother-in-blood dismounting. He was much relieved. He rushed up, surprising Cane with the fervency of his welcome, and made him acquainted with the fact of his father's sudden arrival, and his having noticed the body. These were two pieces of intelligence which entirely took Cane by surprise; but, equal to the occasion, he spoke after a few minutes' reflection.

"Now, look 'ere: we want to get rid of that carcass —that is the first thing to be done; hand hafter that you can gammon penitent, tell hall to the governor, hand get round 'im, hand you'll be has right has hever. Ten to one 'e'll give you charge 'ere, hand cut 'ome; hand, my word, we'll commence then hon a new lay. Hour luck his honly just a-turning."

"But what shall we do about—about—I mean—that thing over there?" asked Ralf, his voice sinking to a whisper as he pointed in the direction of the lagoons on the mailman's track.

"Hit's nigh full moon to-night," returned Cane. "'Ave yer got hany quiet 'osses in the paddock?"

"Yes," returned the other. "Why?"

"When they hall goes to bed, we'll get hup the 'osses, saddle a couple, hand lead hout hanother with

a pack-saddle, fish the stiff un hout o' the water, hand hump 'im hoff the road somewhere, and make hashes hof 'im. There's plenty hof time to get back hafore morning. Now, cut haway back, and hi'll be hup hat the 'ouse by the time I thinks the rest 'as turned hin. You come hout when you 'ears me a-whistling, hand we'll set to work."

Ralf did as he was bid; but he thought his father and the overseer would never leave off talking, so anxious did he feel to get away out to destroy the evidence of his crime. He could not understand Cane's coolness and indifference.

Just as the rest were rising to retire, he distinguished a long low whistle, not far off. No one noticed it but himself. He gave his stained hand in friendly clasp to the others, and wished them "good night."

Again the whistle. This time he slipped out and spoke a few words to Cane, begging him to wait some minutes longer, until all should have time to fall asleep. About the buildings a quantity of couch-grass grew, which, although short from constant grazing, still afforded very sweet picking to the horses, who were accustomed to come up each night for a short time and feed on it. A number of these were now engaged cropping the short feed. After about a quarter of an hour's waiting, they selected three

suitable ones, bridled, saddled, and led them out of the paddock at some distance from the house, through a gap in the fence, which a couple of loose rails afforded. Then mounting, they made the best of their way along the track.

Cane lit his pipe, and leading the pack-horse, followed the shivering leader as if he had been engaged in the most ordinary occupation in life. Ralf could not speak. He made his way, as if under a mesmeric spell, towards the object which fascinated his mind. He felt that he must look upon it once more, although he hated and feared it. They push along, cantering when they can, for Cane perpetually urges haste. Here it was where they saw him leave the plain and enter the timber.

This is the *spot*. As they turn off the road and approach the lagoons, a turtle drops off a branch of a tree into the water with a splash, and a mob of ducks fly up with an alarming quacking noise and hurried flapping. It startles Ralf, and even Cane loses his equanimity for a little. Now they look for what they know only too well is there. Where is it? They walk side by side round the black pool, for Ralf will not leave his companion's side for one instant.

It is not there. "Can *you* see the —— thing?" inquires Cane.

Ralf shakes his head; but the next minute he

stands glaring fixedly at something on the dark water half covered by the broad leaves of the lotus.

"What's yonder floats on the rueful flood?" Ah, they need no one to tell them that!

"Don't be a —— fool now," fiercely grinds out Cane between his teeth. "Here, give us a 'old o' that 'ere long stick, till I fish 'im hout." They had "good luck to their fishing;" and scarcely knowing what he did, Ralf assists in dragging the stiffened form out on the bank and lifting it on to the pack-saddle, where they, or rather Cane, who alone seems to have his wits about him, fastened it as best he could.

A small range of hills not far away rose on their left hand, and Cane directed Ralf to lead the way across them. It was a terrible journey. Ralf feared to ride on, and feared to stay. The curlew's mournful cry chilled his blood, and the branches of the trees he passed seemed to clutch at him with avenging hands.

"'Old 'ard a bit," utters the man of blood behind; "the —— thing's a-slippin' hoff the 'oss. Get hoff and shove hit hover a bit." Ralf did as he was bid; but in the act of lifting the cold wet burden, his face comes in contact with the weed-entangled, dripping hair. Not for worlds would he touch it again, and Cane is obliged to dismount and readjust matters.

The dead man is lying on his back across the pack-saddle, the moonlight falling full on the pale mangled

features, his stiff right arm pointing upward to the sky, as if accusing his murderers before Him who set that silent light above them in the midnight heaven. The pack-horse is a bad leader, and drags behind, compelling them to adopt a funeral pace. As they cross the mountain-ridge, the moon reveals to them a stretch of broken, mountainous, dark-looking country, through which winds a tortuous line of silver water. This place is seldom traversed, on account of the rocky soil and poor pasturage. They descend, and after travelling a mile or two into the heart of it, they come upon a large fallen tree, whose limbs afford abundance of fuel.

"It will do," says Cane. "Get hoff and gather some wood."

Ralf sets to work like a madman. Cane undoes the straps, and giving the ghastly pack a push, upsets it on the ground, where it falls on all-fours,—being supported by the drawn and stiffened limbs. They now cover it with limbs and logs of wood. Hide it from light; shut it out from view. They draw the horses away; and Cane at last, striking a match, sets fire to a pile of dead leaves. There it burns; now it seizes the small stuff, and soon it roars up in a great blaze. He fires the pile in several places. The heat is so great that they are forced to retire for some time, during which the flames rise higher and fiercer.

They sit together at the foot of a large tree. Ralf's head is buried in his hands, which are resting on his knees; while his companion draws out a short black pipe, which he proceeds to light, as he watches the fire, from which fitful gleams fall, sometimes upon his dogged bullet-head and heavy jowl, and sometimes upon the three horses, as they stand tied up close at hand.

At last the flames sink lower—the small stuff is evidently consumed—and rudely pushing Ralf, he orders him to "stick on some more."

As in a dream, his nostrils filled with the sickening odour of the roasting flesh, the wretched man approached the fire, a bundle of fuel in his arms; but, powers of mercy, what a sight met his gaze! The body had been turned by the falling wood; the sinews had contracted, and altered its position.

It was on its knees. The hair and beard were burnt away, as well as the lips, revealing the grinning teeth. The head had fallen back, and the arm still remained pointing to heaven, as if the body, in the last moments of its existence, obeyed the latest desires of the immortal spirit it had clothed, and implored divine vengeance for blood spilt.

His nerves could stand the strain no longer, and the criminal fell to the ground in a fainting-fit before the dumb accuser.

Cane sprang up, and dragging Ralf a little on one side, muttered to himself—

"If it wasn't that you might be useful some o' them days, I'd shove you hon the coals halso—ten to one hif you don't let heverythink hout."

In an hour or two it was all over. Charred bones alone remained; and making a huge fire above them, which would continue to burn for some hours, they once more retraced their steps through the dismal forest, arriving at Cambaranga about half an hour before daylight.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

BESSIE'S MARRIAGE—MUSTERING FOR NEW COUNTRY—THE HON. MR DESMARD.

On the return of the Betyammo party from Yering, Bessie's wedding took place without delay. The clergyman had accompanied them back, everything was in readiness, and the affair passed off quietly. There were many present; but most of them came the day before, and left immediately after the ceremony. Fitzgerald had returned just in time to be present, and rode over with John, who acted as groom's-man. Stone looked very well, with his honest, manly countenance, and robust, athletic figure, beside merry-faced Bessie, whose eyes sparkled like an April day.

Phœbe was of course the principal bride's-maid, and felt much at parting from her only sister,—the playmate of her childhood's days, and companion of her more advanced years. Mr Gray, with his kind, motherly wife, went about cheerily, as usual, and seemed to realise the fact that a son had at last been

given to them; and Mrs Gray especially appeared not a little pleased as she contemplated her daughter's bearded protector.

It was, however, over at last. Mr and Mrs Stone took their seats in the buggy—for the ceremony had taken place in the morning early—and bidding good-bye to all, started on their wedding-trip to New South Wales, amid a shower of old boots and slippers.

Most of the guests left after lunch, among them Fitzgerald and John, the latter of whom now had some busy work before him. The scene they have just witnessed has struck a chord which kept vibrating in Fitzgerald's breast; and as they ride home, he made a confession of his adventure in Sydney, and of his having at last fallen in love, in the most unexpected way.

"Most romantic," replied John. "I was not aware that so much sentiment existed in your nature."

"I daresay not," returned his friend. "I was not aware of it myself. I cannot account for it. I know absolutely nothing of the lady. I only saw her for a few minutes, and yet I cannot forget her. You know how I used to laugh at spoony fellows. Well, I can understand that now."

"But," urged John, "you don't know whether she is engaged or not. She may be unamiable—stupid."

"It's no use, West. You may be right, but I feel

drawn to her. I believe in her. I can read a noble, constant faith in her high brow and steadfast eyes—truth and reverence in the Madonna-shaped head—sensibility in the delicate nostril—and child-like purity in the beautifully-formed lips and dimpled chin; while her air, figure, and conversation bespeak the cultured woman."

"Ah! it is plain you are in a hopeless way. Is it not strange," he questioned, rather musingly, "that all the charms and virtues you describe with such enthusiasm have been before your eyes for many a year, and that you failed to notice them when displayed to you, and yet invest with them a perfect stranger whose looks may belie her? It is not an uncommon circumstance."

"Whom do you speak of?" demanded Fitzgerald.

"I mean Phœbe Gray."

"Phœbe Gray!" echoed the squatter.

"Yes," said West. "You have not mentioned a beauty, or charm of mind or manner, which Miss Gray does not possess in a large degree. But it is ever the same," he continued, speaking more to himself than the other. "We rarely appreciate sufficiently what we are familiar with; and as frequently as not, we go to the opposite extreme, and overestimate what we do not possess or know. You seem to have endowed this young lady with every virtue under the sun, after an hour's conversation."

"I am sure—that is, I think she has a gentle, charitable disposition."

"So has Phœbe Gray."

"She is refined in her tastes, sensible in her conversation, elegant in her manners."

"Phœbe Gray certainly has not had the advantage of mixing much with society; but as far as manners may be acquired without that, she is all you have described."

"She is witty and well read,—at least I think so, for she had me out of my depths before I knew where I was."

"My dear Fitz, go and talk to Miss Gray; she will open your eyes. You are blind. She does not indeed make a parade of knowledge, but few of her years have read so much or thought so deeply; and she is, besides, what your town beauty may not be—a clever, active little housewife, with a bright interest in the everyday affairs of life, a good devoted daughter, and a loving sister."

"I say, West," said Fitzgerald, abruptly turning round on him,—"I do believe you are struck."

"Yes, I am," replied John—"struck with admiration for her good, endearing qualities of mind and person; but not in love, if you mean that. I am not rich enough to allow myself to indulge in the luxury."

"Well, never mind, old fellow; who knows what

the new country will do for you? You'll come down a rich squatter before long."

This conversation awakened Fitzgerald to a sense of the many excellences in Miss Gray's character, which he had never before perceived; and often afterwards he thought, as he reflected on the truth of what John had said, it would be well for him if he could love her; but that, he felt, was impossible. The face with the brown hair, and soft dark eyes with the long lashes, haunted him.

Next day mustering commenced for the new country. A mixed mob of cattle—cows, steers, and heifers—had to be collected, to the number of one thousand head; and before the ensuing evening, the usual sound of discontented, reproachful, remonstrating, or angry bellows, came from the yard in which the nucleus of the herd about to be sent away were confined.

The stocking of new country afforded Fitzgerald an opportunity of eliminating from the general herd such members of it as were troublesome from one cause or another; and all cattle whose favourite feeding-grounds marched on the large scrubs, together with such as associated with the wild mobs, were condemned to recommence life under different auspices. All cattle, moreover, which, from their knowledge of the country, and their wild nature, made themselves leaders of the rest, were picked out and brought home to the yards.

Thus his own herd became free of many animals which were an unceasing source of annoyance; while the long overland journey, and the daily supervision exercised over them in order to keep them upon their new pastures, together with the change in disposition which their constant contact with the men engaged in looking after them was sure to bring about, could not fail to be productive of the greatest good to the creatures so culled out. Many there were whose constitutions required change of pasture. Some were lean, and would never fatten upon the run to which they were accustomed. Others were so fat, that calves were not to be looked for from them; while a few were determined rovers on neighbouring stations.

Fitzgerald and John had ridden up to the house after yarding their first draft for the north, and were preparing to partake of their evening meal, when the former, who happened to glance out of the window looking up the road, said quickly, "Come here, West; look at this fellow riding up. Keep back a little; don't let him observe you."

The new-comer was indeed an object worthy of observation, and both the young men mentally ejaculated the words, "New chum."

He was an extremely nice-looking young fellow, with a high-bred, intelligent face, shaved, with the exception of a fair moustache. His dress and horse,

however, attracted attention, owing to the singularity of both. The steed was one whose great age was not less remarkable than his extreme leanness. He was, in fact, a mass of bones and long hair, but had doubtless, many years ago, been of indisputable gameness, which was evinced by the constant motion of the pointed ears surmounting the brave, wrinkled old head, and the undiminished fire of the bold eyes, above which were situated deep cavernous hollows. A single tusk stuck out, wild-boar fashion, on one side of the withered upper lip, whose fallen-in appearance betrayed the want of teeth in the poor old gums. Still his step, as he bowled up to the slip-panel, was brisk and energetic, though slightly tottering; and the stump of his docked tail stood up fiercely erect, bristling with short hair.

The dress of his rider betrayed something of the romantic imagination which colours the actions of so many new arrivals from Europe. A scarlet shirt and Garibaldi jacket, together with white breeches and Napoleon boots, and a helmet from which depended the gay ends of a silken pugaree, formed his costume. His waist was confined by a snake-skin belt sustaining innumerable snake-skin pouches; a revolver in its pouch was slung on the left hip, while a formidable silver-mounted bowie-knife with ivory handle depended by silver chains from the other. In addition to

this, he carried in his hand a very fine-looking fowling-piece.

"By Jove, old fellow," muttered Fitzgerald, "you'll never be taken alive!"

Presently one of the station blackboys, who happened to be loitering about, entered with what perhaps had never been seen on Ungahrun before—viz., a visiting-card, on which was printed, "The Hon. Adolphus Maurice de la Chapelle Desmard."

"Oh, hold me up!" groaned the squatter, handing John the pasteboard, and going to the door, where, in spite of the grotesque attire, he could not help being favourably impressed with his visitor's gentlemanly bearing.

The new-comer's address was likewise good, although somewhat marred by a drawling form of speech.

"Ah—Mistah Fitzgewald—ah—I conclude."

"That is my name," said the squatter, bowing slightly.

"Ah—I—ah—heeah you are about—ah—sending some cattle northwards, and—ah—I came up—ah—to make some inquiries about them. The fact is—ah—I would—very much like to—ah—accompany them."

"I shall be most happy, Mr Desmard, to give you any information you require; but in the meantime, please to turn out your horse and come inside. We are just about sitting down to dinner."

The young man managed to unsaddle his old horse, though with considerable awkwardness, and turned him into the paddock, stroking his hog-maned neck, and patting his lean sides—the hair on which, from its length (the result of great poverty), bore a strong resemblance to fur—remarking,—

"Wonderful cweateah! Suhpwisingly intelligent! But—ah—I am inclined to think him—ah—aged."

"So am I," returned his host, smiling.

"He—ah—requires no looking after whatever; nevah stways; always chooses the wivah-bed, or bed of a cweek—ah—to pasture in. He—ah—is vewy deah to me. He—ah—in fact, saved my life."

"Did he indeed!" said Fitzgerald, looking at the ancient one with more respect than he had at first exhibited. "Well, we'll find some more tender grass for him to-morrow than the paddock affords; meantime, bring your things inside."

This Mr Desmard did, having occasion to make two journeys in so doing. His valise was twice the size of an ordinary one, and many articles hung to his saddle, after the manner of his tribe. The old horse must indeed have been a game creature to struggle on under so heavy a burden.

In the course of dinner—which meal Mr Desmard sat down to in his accoutrements, considerably to the uneasiness of the other two, who were not at all fond

of being in the neighbourhood of new chums' revolvers —he gave them a short account of himself and his intentions.

"My—ah—father is Lord Martlett. Perhaps you know the name."

Fitzgerald did not, but John recognised it as that of a popular, though by no means wealthy, peer in one of the adjoining counties to his own.

"Well—ah—when travelling by wail, my—ah—father met by accident a gentleman who—ah—descwibed himself as—ah—Mistah Bosterre, of Blowaway Downs, in Queensland; and my—ah—father, who is not a wich man, and—ah—has a numbah of —ah—childwen (I am the third—ah—son), was delighted to heeah of an opening in—ah—this country for a young man. He—ah—made some inquiwies, and—ah—found that—ah—Mr Bosterre was—ah—weally the—ah—man he wepwesented himself to be, and—ah—had him to Desmard Castle, wheah he was —ah—vewy kind indeed to him.

"The end of this—ah—was, that Mistah Bosterre agweed—ah—to give me—ah—an appointment on his estate; and—ah—my father agweed to—ah—pay him a pwemium of—ah—thwee hundwed pounds for—ah —the first yeah.

"I—ah—do not know much of—ah—business, but I thought it would—ah—look better were the—ah—

money paid quarterly; and—ah—I pwoposed this to my—ah—father, who at once agweed, as did—ah—Mistah Bosterre, after some—ah—objections.

"Well, when I awived at Blowaway Downs, I—ah—weally did not see how I was to—ah—make any money. I had—ah—to sit all day with—ah—Mrs Bosterre in the—ah—parlour, and be introduced by her to—ah—her visitors as—ah—the son of her—ah—'deah fwiend Lord Martlett;' or I had to wide into town with—ah—old Bosterre, and undergo the same.

"It was about this time that—ah—I became possessed of—ah—my horse. He is called Jacky-Jacky, after a celebwated bushwanger who—ah—owned him about thirty—ah—years ago; and—ah—although I have been led to doubt some—ah—at least of the statements which—ah—have been made to me, I understand—ah—from various quarters, that—ah—such is weally the case."

"I quite believe it also," said Fitzgerald.

"Ah, glad you say so. Bosterre sold him to me. Well—ah—I found my first quarter's pwemium was—ah—paid, and my second was begun; and—ah—I thought—ah—I would ask old Bosterre about—ah—my appointment, and—ah—he quite agweed with me about the—ah—necessity for work, and—ah—brought me down next morning to the ram-yard, and—ah—gave

the rams into my chahge to—ah—look after. The cweateahs were engaged in—ah—knocking their heads together in—ah—the most painful way; and—ah—during my connection with them, which—ah—was only during one day, I may wemark, I—ah—found that—ah—they wesorted to it—ah—as a wecweation when not particularly engaged—ah—otherwise.

"On weturning to the house I—ah—awrdored the groom to—ah—saddle Jacky-Jacky, and I—ah—wode down and took my chahge away to the—ah—woods. We—ah—soon lost sight of—ah—habitations, and the solitude was dwedful. I began to—ah—wemember those unfortunates of whom—ah—I had wead as lost—ah—for ever. I looked awound; there was—ah—no watah. I had—ah—nothing to eat. There was—ah—no game to be seen, except—ah—a few small birds in the tops of—ah—a vewy high tree; but—ah—although I fired all my cahtwidges except one—ah—at them, I—ah—missed them. A wevolver is—ah—wather difficult to manage, when—ah—shooting at—ah—vewy small birds, I find."

"It is indeed," agreed the other two.

"I became alarmed. No—ah—watah; no—ah—food. Only one shot in my wevolver. I—ah—did not know where to turn. The sun was blazing—ah—hot. Was I—ah—going to pewish alone, with—ah—hungah and—ah—thirst? My thwoat got parched.

I felt—ah—alweady the agonies of—ah—death. I determined to—ah—make one attempt to—ah—save my life. I wesolved to—ah—kill a ram, and—ah—dwink the blood of the cweateah. I—ah—dismounted and—ah—tied up Jacky-Jacky, and—ah—seeing one lying down not—ah—far off, which I had noticed in the course of the—ah—morning, from the gweat size of his—ah—horns, and his vewy woolly body, I appwoached cautiously, for I—ah—expected evewy moment that—ah—he would wish to examine the—ah—stwength of my head; but—ah—he merely wrinkled his nose and—ah—showed his teeth. I—ah—kept my eye upon him, and—ah—I put the ball wight in the—ah—middle of his forehead, upon which he—ah—turned over and—ah—died. Vewy simply, I assuah you. The west of my chahge—ah—scampered away, but—ah—I could not follow them. I—ah—dwew my bowie-knife, and—ah—cutting off the hideous cweateah's—ah—head, I commenced drinking his blood; but—ah—stwange to say, I did not feel at all thirsty after the—ah—first mouthful. Indeed, I became—ah—quite ill, pwobably from the—ah—seveah mental stwain. I—ah—lay down for some time; and as it—ah—grew cooler, I wesolved to abandon myself to—ah—Jacky-Jacky's sagacity, who—ah—wonderful to relate, took me through—ah—paths known to himself, to—ah—the society of my fellow—ah—beings.

But more singular still was—ah—the fact, that when I—ah—got home, the rams were—ah—home before me. And when—ah—I welated the story of my—ah—pewil to Mistah Bosterre, he was—ah—most unfeeling.

"He wushed away down to the—ah—yard, and on weturning he—ah—used the—ah—most fwightful language, and—ah—said that I—ah—had killed his imported Saxon ram—ah—Billy—who was—ah—worth two hundred—ah—pounds; and—ah—he indulged in—ah—so great an amount of—ah—critical licence, and—ah—depweciatory general wemark in weference to all—ah—late awivals, that I felt my—ah—self-wespect would not admit of my—ah—continuing to—ah—weside at Blowaway Downs; and hearing of your—ah—intended journey, I thought I would—ah—call upon you."

Bursts of laughter occasionally interrupted the speaker, and as his hearers looked at one another, again and again they exploded with merriment.

Neither liked Bosterre, who was a well-known character. Boastful, purse-proud, a toady, and a knave, he made a regular trade of entrapping "new chums," and getting premiums from them, and then suffering them to waste their time in idleness, and their means in folly.

With regard to the overland trip, Fitzgerald referred

Desmard to John, who, having taken rather a fancy to the lad, agreed to his forming one of the travellers, promising him at the same time a remuneration equivalent to his services,—a proposal which much delighted the new hand, who had never known how to earn a shilling in his life.

Mustering now proceeded with steady vigour, and Desmard was allowed to gain experience in tailing[1] those already brought in, along with two old and experienced hands, who were much amused with their companion's eccentricities, and who never tired of relating his peculiar sayings.

A few evenings later, the news of old M'Duff's disappearance and rumoured murder struck astonishment and horror into the hearts of all in the district, which gradually increased as, step by step, suspicion fell, and eventually fixed itself firmly, upon Ralf and Cane. Many there were who remained incredulous to the last; but on hearing the report of Cane's having been seen in the neighbourhood, John felt a steady conviction of his guilt, while Fitzgerald was no less sure of Ralf's complicity—a belief which was also strongly shared in by the stockman, Tommy, who calmly remarked that he knew "all along Ralf was born to be hanged."

[1] Herding.

On the morning of the day after the burning of the body a blackfellow came in from the bush, and happening to see Ralf first, coolly addressed him with—

"I say, me been see-em two fellow whitefellow burn-em 'nother whitefellow lasnigh."[1]

"You *see* them?" utters Ralf, looking for nothing but immediate detection and arrest.

"Yohi, me see 'em; bail that fellow see me. Me sit down good way; me frighten; by-and-by me track 'em yarraman, that been come up here."[2]

"Look here," said Ralf, quickly, "bail you yabber 'nother whitefellow. Me want to man 'em that one two fellow whitefellow. By-and-by you and me look out."[3]

Giving the nigger some rations and tobacco, and enjoining further secrecy, Ralf made for Cane's retreat, and informed him.

"You —— fool, why didn't you bring the nigger 'ere? we might 'ave knocked 'im hover, hand made hall safe."

"No, no," said Ralf, decisively; "no more blood.

[1] "I saw two white men burning another one last night."

[2] "Yes; I saw them. They did not see me; I was a long way off. I was frightened. Afterwards I tracked their horses; they came up here."

[3] "Look here, don't tell any other white man; I want to catch those two white men. By-and-by you and I will search for them."

By this time all his tribe know it. We can, perhaps, get away now if we start at once; but sooner than shed more blood, I'll stay and give myself up."

Cane could also see the futility of endeavouring to hold out longer against fate; and that night, after laying hands on whatever could be got of use to them in the house, the two disappeared, taking with them four of the best horses in the paddock.

A few days afterwards, police arrived from Yering, headed by Dowlan, who made himself very active in his investigations.

It was a simple matter to trace the horse-tracks from the lagoon to the fire. Blacks diving in the former brought up some of the dead man's effects, and the charred bones at the fire spoke for themselves.

This, with their flight, and the statement of one of the men, who swore that he saw Ralf and another returning to the station some days previously, just before dawn, and the testimony of the blackfellow, formed a chain of circumstantial evidence which left no doubt in any one's mind as to the perpetrators of the deed, and a pursuit after them was at once instituted.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OVERLAND WITH CATTLE—THE START—THE STAMPEDE.

At last the mustering was completed. The stores and rations necessary for the requirements of the journey, and the supplies for the new station during the first six months, were all packed upon a great bullock-dray, to be drawn by twelve huge oxen. The men had been hired. They were six in number, of whom one was a bullock-driver and another a cook. Two blackboys were also to be attached to the expedition, thus making the total number ten. They were, — John, in charge; Desmard; four drovers; a bullock-driver; a cook, and two blackboys.

As it was highly necessary to watch the cattle at night, the party were told off into regular watches, with the exception of the bullock-driver and cook, whose duties exempted them from this part of the work, and of the two natives, on whom little or no reliance could be placed, the temptation to sleep

proving sometimes too strong for them. The night was thus divided into three watches of four hours each, each watch consisting of two men. Twenty-two horses had been shod, and were divided amongst the party, in the proportion of one each to the bullock-driver and cook, two night-horses, and two to each of the other members, with two spare ones.

Of the two native boys who were anxious to follow John's fortunes for a time, one was about fifteen years of age, the other about fourteen. The eldest, "Blucher," was rather an uncivilised lad, not having been much in contact with whites, but of an energetic disposition. The other, whose appellation was "Gunpowder," was a gentle, quiet boy, with a mild face, large soft eyes, and curly hair. Blucher, indeed, had only made up his mind to go with the cattle a day or two before they started, owing to an altercation which had taken place between him and the Ungah-run cook. Native boys employed on a station are almost always fed by their master's hand, or from the kitchen. The employer cuts off a large slice of bread and beef, and pours out a liberal supply of tea; and the boy seats himself outside on the ground, very much more contented with this meal than if he had had the trouble of cooking it himself. This is often done to protect him from the rapacity of his

friends, with whom he is bound by his tribal laws to divide his food, and partly to save the time they invariably waste in cooking.

The blackboys are quick at appreciating differences in the social scale, and a single look enables them to distinguish between a master and a mere whitefellow. It pleases them to have their food from their master's table, or cooked in the kitchen; and as they are throughout their lives mere children, they are much humoured, and their presence tolerated about the head-station buildings.

The kitchen-woman on Ungahrun had but a short temper, and the boys having been brought rather much forward during the mustering, through which they had been of the greatest service, got into the habit of walking into the kitchen for the purpose of lighting their pipes at the stove, notwithstanding that a large fire burnt under a boiler outside. To their minds, the fire inside the house gave a much sweeter taste to the pipe they loved.

Blucher, as usual, had marched into the room on the morning in question, coolly ignoring the remonstrances of the irritated woman, when her passion getting the better of her, she made a rush at him with the poker, which, perhaps, she had heated on purpose, and touched him on the bare leg—for, like all his race, when not on horseback he doffed his

trousers and boots, and wore nothing but a Crimean shirt. The pain of the wound was as nothing to the indignity. With a bound he rushed into the "Cawbawn Humpy," his eyes flashing, with insulted pride exclaiming, "Missa Fitzgell, White Mary cook'em me," pointing to his leg.[1] Nor could Fitzgerald's remonstrances or condolences avail anything; Blucher tendered his services to John, who, finding that Fitzgerald did not object, exchanged him for another boy whom he had purposed taking.

Blacks are excitable to the last degree, extremely, fond of change and adventure, and, in their own way, brave enough. Blucher and Gunpowder, on the eve of their departure for a new country, where they would be certain to come in contact with *myalls*,[2] were looked upon as embyro heroes, and entertained their admiring tribal brethren with much boastful promise of future daring—indeed, so much enthusiasm sprang up in the tribe, that even the grey-headed old men assailed John to be allowed to accompany him.

The day of departure came, the gates of the herding-yard were thrown open, and Fitzgerald sitting on his horse on one side, with John opposite, counted out the squeezing, roaring, many-coloured crowd; and the number being ascertained, a start was effected. The

[1] All white women are termed "White Marys" by the natives.
[2] Wild, uncivilised aboriginals—*jangalis*.

men mounted, and the overland journey to the new home, nearly 600 miles away, commenced.

During his stay on Ungahrun, John had made two or three short trips with cattle, and the experience thus gained gave him much confidence. His measures were carefully weighed beforehand; and his knowing exactly how to meet any difficulty which might arise assisted greatly in making matters smooth and pleasant for all parties. The bullock-dray with the cook had started very early, and the driver was ordered to halt at a certain spot about thirteen miles distant, where John intended making his first camp. The usual travelling distance for cattle is from seven to nine miles per day; but being fresh, and not inclined to eat, they could have gone considerably farther. They march along evidently very much displeased with having their long-accustomed habits broken into.

On the run, when left to themselves, they feed the greater part of the night; now they have to learn to sleep during the cool dewy darkness, when the grass is sweetest, and march, march, march during the hot dusty day, picking up a scanty meal by the roadside, off what has probably been walked over by half-a-dozen mobs of sheep and cattle within the last fortnight. They dislike exceedingly feeding on ground over which sheep have grazed: they cannot bear the smell left behind them by those

animals; it disgusts them; besides which, the sheep crowd together in great numbers, and tread down and destroy more than they eat. Now and then a roar breaks from one of the exiles, who remembers an old mate left behind, or perhaps two or three grown-up members of her family; or some hobbledehoy of a steer cannot forget his mother, or they think in concert of the sweet wattle-shaded gullies and rich pastures of Ungahrun, and bellow disconsolately a bovine version of "Home, sweet home." The men are disposed in a half-circle behind the cattle, at some distance from one another. The pace is very slow; and although for the first day or two they cannot well do their work on foot owing to the unsteadiness of the cattle, they allow full rein to their horses, who graze contentedly as they walk behind the mob, managing to chew the grass almost as well with the bit in their mouths as without it.

The cattle will not camp in the middle of the day yet; and the men, who are old drovers, have taken care to provide some food with which they satisfy themselves, washing it down with cold water from the nearest water-hole. About four or five o'clock in the evening, they come in sight of the camp chosen for the night's resting-place. It is a pretty timbered ridge, covered with green grass. The bullock-dray is drawn up at a convenient spot, near

which a large fire burns, its smoke curling away up among the dark-leaved trees. The bullock-driver and cook are busily engaged in erecting a couple of tents, the smaller of which is to be occupied by John and Desmard. The men are to share the other, and the immense tarpaulin which covers the bullock-dray with its load, and extends on each side of it propped up by forks, between them.

The deep-sounding bullock-bells jangle down in the creek, and the spare horses have been hobbled out, and feed all round. It is too early as yet to get into camp, for the cattle have walked unceasingly. In a few days they will be glad to graze, and then the arrival at camp can be timed properly. The feed here is good, but they will not look at it. They turn and march homewards in a body, on being left to themselves for a moment, and are continually brought back. A cooey from the cook announces supper, and half the men start for the camp to make a quiet meal before dark. This will probably be the worst night during the whole journey. The second half of the party are afterwards relieved by the first; and as they discuss the evening meal, they discuss also the likelihood of a quiet camp or a rush off it.

Cattle are very liable to be frightened off their camp during the first few nights on the road; and when this occurs, a tremendous stampede, with seri-

ous consequences sometimes, takes place, and ever afterwards the cattle are on the watch to make a similar rush. This is more particularly the case with a mob of strong, rowdy bullocks; and some breeds of cattle are naturally wilder than others, and therefore more inclined to start.

The Ungahrun herd had a considerable strain of Hereford blood running through it, as any one might discover by the numerous red bodies and white faces; and the cattle, although very fine and large-framed, were characterised by the rather uneasy nature of that celebrated breed; besides which, the presence in the mob of the wildest animals on the run and a number of scrubbers might lead to a stampede at any moment, and on this account great precaution and vigilance were maintained.

Fires had been lighted at stated distances, in a circle large enough to permit the travelling herd to move about easily within it. Horses ridden during the day were exchanged for fresh ones, and the cattle were slowly driven into the centre of the fire-enclosed ring. Night comes on, but they think not of lying down. Incessantly moving, they keep up one continuous roar, and endeavour to walk off in every direction. All hands are busy keeping them back. The night is very dark, but one can see the forms moving out between the fires. When one goes another follows,

and so on in a string. It takes the men all their time to keep them in.

West had just made his way from one fire to another, meeting Fitzgerald there, who had come from his sentry-duty between it and the fire beyond, and they have driven in the cattle as they came; but looking back again, they each see the determined brutes stringing out as fast as ever. They turn their horses, and with suppressed shouts force them back, and returning, meet once more to repeat the same over again. Between almost every fire the same thing is going on.

The night is quite dark; the uproar is tremendous. One or two men have already mistaken their comrades' horses for stray cattle, and have called forth a volley of curses by using their whips.

"Way!" "Look back!" "Head on there!" "Come out o' that!" "Way woh!" "Look out!" are heard in all directions.

"I'll tell you what, West," says Fitzgerald, "you'll have to ring them. Pass the word round for all hands to follow one another in a circle, at a little distance apart."

This plan succeeded admirably. No sooner does a cunning beast try to make its way out after the sentry has passed, than another sentry, moving up in the circle, observes it, and is immediately followed by a

third and fourth, and so on continually. The cattle ring also. They at last get tired of the continual motion and bellowing, and some lie down, but not for long. They are up again, and the same thing occurs once more. After about four hours they become a little quieter, and half the men are despatched to the camp to get some sleep, leaving the other half on duty. The watch who have turned in still keep their horses tied up in case of accident, and their comrades on duty are obliged to be very active; but a number of cattle are now lying down. About half-past two in the morning the first watch is called, and the rest obtain a short repose until a little before daybreak, when they are roused by the cook, who has been preparing breakfast during the last half-hour.

After the morning meal, they proceed to catch their respective nags from among the horses which have been brought up by Gunpowder, whose turn it is for that duty, and follow the cattle, which have been making the most vigorous efforts to leave the camp since the rising of the morning star. They head them northwards, and once more the creatures are lining each side of the road in a long string. The rest of the men having finished their meal and changed their horses, follow them, leaving the bullock-driver and cook to bring up the rear with the baggage, and one of the blackboys to follow with the spare horses. The

cattle are inclined to feed this morning; and about eleven o'clock the dray and horses come up and pass on ahead about a mile. The cook makes a fire, and has dinner ready by the time the cattle come up. Each one fills the quart he carries at his saddle-dee, and helps himself to bread and beef; and the dray starts on ahead for the appointed camping-place, arriving there about half-past two or three, when the preparations for the evening meal are again commenced. The cattle camp very much better the second night, and half of the men turn in immediately after supper. In a night or two the ordinary watch of two men will be quite sufficient. Fitzgerald takes leave of the party next morning, and returns, after shaking hands with John and cordially wishing him prosperity. Desmard is also made happy with an assurance that Jacky-Jacky shall be shifted on to the tenderest feed on the whole run.

And now John is in sole charge. Upon him depends the responsibility of the whole undertaking. Desmard's society is a great boon to him; for although he mixes freely and converses familiarly with his men to a certain extent, the maintenance of authority demands that he shall live apart from them; and without the young new chum he would have been very lonely in his camp. The weather is gloriously fine, as usual, and the travelling is quite a

pleasure-trip. John rides on ahead, selects a suitable spot for a camp, examines the watering-places, and the cattle graze leisurely along.

Some of the men walk, leading their horses, in order to spare them as much as possible, the loosened bits enabling them to browse as they follow behind the mob. Here a drover sits side-saddle fashion for the sake of ease, idly flicking at the grass tussocks with his long whip; there one snatches a few moments to read a page in a yellow-bound volume, lifting his head now and then to observe how his charge are getting on. The blackboy with the cattle has fastened his horse's rein to the stirrup-iron, and allows him to feed about, while he moves from tree to tree, his hand shading his upturned eyes as he scrutinises each branch in his search for the tiny bee which manufactures his adored *cheugah-bag;*[1] or with cat-like stealthiness, waddy in hand, cautiously stalks the unsuspecting kangaroo-rat or bandicoot.

The cattle have quietly selected their respective places in the line of march; a certain lot keep in front as leaders, and the wings, body, and tail are each made up of animals who will continue to occupy the same position all the way, unless compelled by sickness to change it. The sharp-sighted experienced drivers already know many of them by sight so accu-

[1] Sugar-bag—the native pigeon-English word for honey.

rately, as to be able to detect the absence from the herd of any portion of it. At sundown they draw quietly on to the camp, and are soon lying down peacefully, and the two men appointed for the first watch mount the night-horses, and allow all hands to get to supper. At ten o'clock they call West and Desmard.

John has taken the young man into the same watch with himself, partly to guard him against any practical joking which his simplicity may give rise to, and partly to supply any want of precaution, or remedy any inadvertent neglect occasioned by his inexperience.

They come out of the tent. All is dark night. The fire burns brightly, and throws a ruddy glow on the white tent. The dim outline of the bullock-dray, with its tarpaulin-covered load, looms against the dark background a little way off. The two black-boys, stripped naked, lie almost in the ashes of the fire; their clothes are scattered about; their new blankets, already spotted with grease, dirt, and ashes, are made use of by a couple of dogs who belong to the bullock-driver. Buckets, pots, and camp-ovens stand together in a cluster. Everything is hushed and quiet. As West and Desmard stand at the fire filling their pipes, they can detect dimly the extent of the great cattle-camp by the reflection of the various fires on the tops of the trees. How quiet the

cattle are! not a breath is heard. The sound of the large variously-toned bullock-bells comes melodiously from where the workers are feeding half a mile away.

Now a horse's tread is heard, and the figure of a horse and his rider issues from the darkness into the bright firelight. The man dismounts. "All quiet?" asks John. "Yes," answers the watch; "not a stir out of them yet." Another watchman now rides up on the other side, his horse shying slightly as he nears the tent, and makes a similar report. John and Desmard mount, and make their way round the mob from fire to fire, until they meet on the other side. Some of the cattle are lying down, almost in the path, and they nearly stumble over them in the darkness.

"How—ah—vewy intewesting this is!" remarks Desmard; "quite—ah—womantic, keeping midnight watch. The—ah—deah cweateahs seem to have—ah—made up their minds to—ah—behave themselves."

"Yes," said John, "for a little; but in about half an hour's time you will find that it will take you all your time to keep them in the camp, and perhaps they may trouble us for nearly an hour, but will then settle down and (unless disturbed) remain perfectly quiet until morning. I chose this watch on that very account. About eleven o'clock every night they will rise, and move in the same manner all through the journey."

"How—ah—vewy singulah!"

It happened exactly as John had said. One by one the cattle rose and stretched themselves, until the whole camp became alive with a moving, bellowing, dusky crowd, incessantly endeavouring to straggle away. It required much vigilance and activity on the part of both West and Desmard to keep them together, and the latter proved himself a very efficient assistant.

At last the cattle began to settle once more. One by one they selected new sleeping-places, and, dropping first on their knees, they lazily sank down on the ground with a flop, emitting a loud sigh of content as they did so.

John had stationed himself on the side of the cattle nearest home, leaving the most easily guarded side to Desmard, and was congratulating himself at hearing the welcome sigh heaved all around him when——a sudden rush—a whirr—a tearing, crashing, roaring, thundering noise was heard; a confused whirl of dark forms swept before him, and the camp, so full of life a minute ago, is desolate. It was "a rush," a stampede.

Desperately he struck his horse with the spurs, and tore through the darkness after the flying mob, guided by the smashing roar ahead of him. Several times he came violently into collision with saplings and

branches, and at last, in crossing a creek, he fell headlong with his horse in a water-worn gully, out of which he managed to extricate himself, happily without having sustained any injury. But not so with the horse—the creature groaned and struggled, but could not rise.

Undoing the bridle, John climbs out again and listens. The noise of the retreating mob can still be heard in the distance, and he thinks he can also distinguish shouts. Horses are grazing near; and hastily catching the first he came to, he jumped on its back, and had proceeded nearly a hundred yards before he recollected that he had forgotten to remove the hobbles.

In remedying his mistake, he now observes that the animal which he has chosen is the most noted buck-jumper in the mob—one that few would venture to ride saddled, but not one barebacked. He does not give the matter a second thought, however, so intent is he on pursuing the cattle. He flies along, urging the creature with the hobbles in his hand. He does not know where he is going, but keeps straight ahead on chance, and at last has the satisfaction of hearing the bellowing once more in the distance. He gallops up and finds that one of the men, mounted on Desmard's horse, has managed to stop the break-aways. Presently another man and Blucher ride up. They watch the cattle together until morning, for the animals are terrified and ready to stampede again.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE ROAD—ABORIGINAL INNOCENTS—A WET NIGHT ON WATCH—DODGING COWS.

By daylight the rest of the men came up, and the cattle were driven back, and once more started along the road. As they returned to camp broken saplings and branches attest the force of last night's flight, and some of the cattle appear more or less disabled. It had been most fortunate that they were stopped so quickly, for in a short time they would have split up in many directions, and the mustering of them afresh would have caused much delay.

At breakfast John asked Desmard if anything had occurred on his side of the camp to start the mob.

"Well—ah—no," said he. "I weally am ignorant of any cause. Just—ah—before they went, all was—ah—quiet. One—ah—pooh cweateah neah me lay down and—ah—uttered a most heart-wending sigh. She—ah—seemed most—ah—unhappy, so I—ah—dismounted, and—ah—walked up to her, and—ah—she weally was

most ungwateful, she—ah—actually wushed at me, and—ah—vewy neahly caught me, and then—ah—something fwightened the rest, and—ah—some one took my horse."

The men roared while John explained to the well-meaning cause of the trouble, that the cattle being totally unused to the sight of a man on foot at night, his near approach to them had caused the alarm; and, indeed, quieter cattle might have objected to his richly coloured garments.

West's horse lay where he fell. His neck was broken.

They are now on the direct track of travelling mobs of cattle and sheep, on their way to stock new country. They camp each night where some other mob have rested the night before them. The stations they pass are mostly worked by bachelors. The roughness of their surroundings indicates the want of feminine influence.

Blacks are being allowed in for the first time at one station they pass, and some of the young men employed on it amuse themselves in a good-humoured way with the unsophisticated aboriginals, to whom everything is perfectly new and strange. The natives especially admire the short-cropped hair of the white man, and make signs expressive of the ardent desire they possess to wear their own in a similar fashion. They have never seen a pair of shears, and shriek with

childish joy on noting the rapidity with which an amateur barber, holding his patient at arm's-length, crops his long curly hair to the bone, tastefully leaving a high ridge from the forehead to the neck, after the fashion of a cock's-comb. All must be shorn in turn, and ingenuity is taxed to multiply new and startling fashions. Another begs to be allowed to fire off a gun, and receives an overloaded one, the result being a sudden upset, and an increased reverence for the white man's strength. A bottle of scent is held to the nose of a wild-looking fellow who has just been christened by the name of "Bloody-bones," of which he is immensely proud. He cannot endure the smell, and turns away, expressing his disgust by holding his nose and imitating sickness. One pertinacious black-fellow insists upon being permitted to smoke, and is handed a pipe in which has been artfully concealed below the tobacco a thimbleful of gunpowder, occasioning of course an explosion as soon as the fire reaches it, to the surprise of the savage, who thinks himself shot.

Horse-exercise is also greatly sought after, and one powerful middle-aged man entreats so persistently in his own language, and by signs, that the favour is granted. An old race-horse with a peculiarly hard mouth and spirited action is tied up hard by. A brilliant idea enters the head of a genius who is plagued beyond

endurance by the would-be cavalier. He unsaddles "old Chorister," and undoes the throat-lash, so that should the horse get away the bridle may be easily rubbed off by him. The grizzly warrior is assisted to mount. The reins are put in his hands, but he prefers clutching the mane. One—two—three—off! The old hurdle-horse receives a cut across the rump, and perhaps remembering past triumphs on the turf, he makes a start which would have done credit to his most youthful days. Unguided, he gets in among some broken gullies, and clears each in gallant style, the black man sitting like a bronze statue. In an instant he is out of sight, leaving the tribe in a whirl of admiration at his rapid disappearance, and the whites convulsed with laughter at the old fellow's surprise, and monkey-like seat. By-and-by the rider comes back on foot, bridle in hand, shaking his head, and saying, "Tumbel down." He is offered another mount, but declines for the present.

Day after day the routine of work was unchanged. Sometimes the pasture over which they travelled was very bare, and the water bad and scarce. Dead animals were passed every mile or two. Most of the ordinary operations of life had to be got over under difficulties. When the beef ran short, a beast had to be shot on the camp, and salted on the ground, its own hide doing duty as the salting-table.

Every alternate Sunday, when the state of grass and water permitted, the cattle were halted, and clothes were washed. All hands had got thoroughly into the work, and the change for the better in Desmard, who had discarded his gorgeous apparel after the night of the rush, became very marked. He grew more useful and practical every day.

Sometimes men from the camps ahead or behind stayed all night at West's, when looking for stray cattle or horses.

One evening a blackfellow rode up. He wore neither hat nor boots, and his wild look, and inability to speak English, denoted that he was a *myall* of one of the tribes lately let in at the stations they had just passed, who had been induced to accompany some travelling mob, the owner of which had not been able to procure a boy when farther south.

Desmard happened to be alone at the camp, the rest being all engaged elsewhere. The grotesque-looking savage jogged up, all legs and wings, and dismounting pointed to his horse with the words—

"Gobble-Gobble——"

"Gobble—ah—Gobble?" interrogated Desmard.

The nigger nodded his head with its shock of tangled curls, and grinned, showing a set of strong white teeth, like a dog's.

"You are—ah—hungwy, I suppose?" said the white

man, producing a large plate full of bread and beef, which the sable stockman soon disposed of, and rising, once more uttered the words—

"Gobble—Gobble, Gobble—Gobble——"

"Gobble—ah—Gobble?" repeated Desmard, with surprise.

The blackfellow nodded.

Desmard returned to the dray, and produced an additional supply, which was also despatched.

Once more the savage grinned and pointed to his horse.

"Gobble, Gobble."

"Gobble—ah—Gobble," again repeated Desmard reflectively, offering more food, which the blackfellow lovingly looked at but rejected, pointing to his distended stomach.

"Gobble—ah—Gobble—singulah—but vewy—ah—suggestive. I—ah—rejoice Jacky-Jacky is not heah."

The blackfellow now put his feet together, and jumped about imitating the action of a hobbled horse, upon which light at once dawned on the Englishman, who provided the delighted *myall* with the articles in question. He had, it turned out, been sent by his master to look for a stray horse, and had been ordered to borrow hobbles at every camp he stayed at, they being scarce at his own.

Desmard began to acquire habits of observation

about this time, and among other things, by watching the cook, he discovered the art of making a damper. This interested him greatly, and he confessed to the "doctor" the ill success of his own first attempt in the baking line, the night before he arrived at Ungahrun.

"I—ah—had camped out for—ah—the first time, in order to—ah—inuah myself to—ah—hardship, and —ah—wished to make a damper—which I—ah—heard was most—ah—delicious. I—ah—made a large fire, and—ah—mixed up the—ah—flour with some—ah—watah in a quart-pot, and—ah—after stirring it, I—ah—made a hole in the—ah—ashes, and I—ah—poured in the mixture, but—ah—though I was nearly blinded, I—ah—covered it up, and—ah—waited, and —ah—waited,—but vewy singulah to say, when I—ah—looked for the damper, it was—ah—not there; but I see now that I—ah—went the wrong way to—ah—work."

Shortly after this the travellers experienced a change in the weather. Frequent thunderstorms came on, and lasted all night, occasionally continuing during the day also. It was a most miserable time. The wretched cattle kept moving about on the puddled-up, muddy camp, bellowing out their discontent, and desire for higher and drier quarters, their unhappiness being only exceeded by that of the drovers. The watch, clothed in oilskins, or with blankets tied round their

necks, splashed and bogged their way around the restless brutes, who constantly endeavoured to steal away on the dark nights, the broad lightning glare alone revealing the fact to the much harassed sentries. Unceasingly, unmercilessly, down poured the heavy rain. The men on watch get wet through almost at once, and sit shivering on their shivering horses. Every five minutes they bend their legs to allow the water to run out of their long boots.

How they long for the slow hours to pass, so that they may get under the shelter of the friendly tarpaulin! At last the hour arrives, but there is no time to stand at the fire as usual this night. Indeed there is none to stand by. It went out long ago. One of them shouts out to the next men for duty, and hurries back to assist in looking after the barely manageable crowd.

The relief now turn out of their blankets and look outside. Everything black, a steady downpour of rain. Everything dripping, — the very ground under their feet oozes out water. They light their pipes hastily, and fasten their blankets around their necks. Splash, —splash,—splash,—a horse comes up, and one of the watch dismounts.

"How are they behaving?"

"Bad. You've got your work before you," answers the other.

"Whereabout is the camp? they seem to be roaring everywhere. I'm blowed if I can see a yard in front of me."

"As soon as you get clear of the dray, stop a moment, and the lightning will show you."

No. 2 rides off, cursing the day he took to cattle-droving, and No. 1 turns in, dripping wet, boots and all, like a trooper's horse (his other clothes were soaked the day before). Still he is under cover, which he feels to be a mercy. His comrade is relieved in like manner, and follows his example, and before long they are both sound asleep.

Daylight breaks upon an equally wretched state of affairs. The blackboys have indeed managed to light a fire in a neighbouring hollow tree, and the cook has with difficulty boiled doughboys, which, although tough and indigestible, are nevertheless hot, and are washed down with pannikins of steaming tea.

There is, however, no time to dry the soaking clothes. The blankets, wet and muddy, are rolled up in a hasty bundle and tossed on the dray. By-and-by, when the sun comes out, the blowflies will deposit their disgusting eggs upon them, which the heat will hatch. The trembling horses, whose hanging heads and drooping under-lips and ears bespeak their abject misery, are saddled. Many of them suffer from bad saddle-galls, which are rendered excruciat-

ingly tender by the constant wet, and in spite of every care they bend in acute agony under the weight of their riders as they are mounted.

A few cows have calved since they started, but the number increases as the calving season approaches, and causes much trouble, labour, and loss.

As it is impossible for the young things to follow their mothers, they are knocked on the head as soon as observed, but the mothers insist upon returning to their dead offspring. They are sent for each day, and are driven after the advancing mob, merely to steal back again on the first opportunity. Many of them make back, and are recovered two or three times before they cease to think of their young ones. Various expedients are adopted to obviate this, but all fail. An old hand, however, whose life has been spent on the road, has recourse to a plan which he confidently affirms he never knew to fail, if properly carried out. He watches until a calf is dropped, and after allowing the mother to lick it for a short time, causes her to be driven away. Then killing the little creature, he skins it carefully; and turning the skin inside out, so as to prevent it coming in contact with anything which can alter its smell, he ties it behind his saddle.

On coming into camp at night, the skin is stuffed hastily, and laid at the foot of a tree. The mother

is brought up quietly. She is thinking of her little one. She sees the dummy. She stops, and gazes. "Moo-oo-oo." She advances: it is like her own. She smells it: it is the smell. She licks it: it *is* her very own. She utters a tender "moo-oo-oo," and contentedly stands guard over the stuffed hide, to the intense satisfaction and joy of Blucher and Gunpowder, upon whom most of the trouble of tracking and recovering the mothers of former calves has fallen.

"My word," says Blucher, in an ecstasy of sly merriment to the old drover, as he watches the fond and deceived parent lick the semblance of her young one—"cawbawn you and me gammon old woman."[1] And indeed it is a blessing that she stays, for the constant fetching back of the straying cows is telling severely upon the jaded horses.

The plan is adopted, and succeeds in every case, saving a world of trouble; and every night two or three cows may be seen watching as many calfskins, while the drowsy watchman sits nodding on a log by the fire.

Day by day they continue their weary pilgrimage. Sometimes they follow the banks of a clear running stream, in whose limpid waters the travel-worn animals stand drinking, as if they would drain its fountains dry. Sometimes they wend their toiling path

[1] "You and I deceived the old cow beautifully."

over rugged ranges, grinding down the shell of their tired hoofs on the sharp-cornered pebbles and granite grit. At times they feed on the luscious herbage and luxuriant blue-grasses of a limestone country, and anon they make the most of the kangaroo-grasses of the poorer sandy lands: but onward still they march for their new home in the "never, never" country.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FORMING A STATION—TRIALS AND TROUBLES OF A PIONEER.

ABOUT this time John received a batch of letters from the south, by a gentleman who was travelling out to a station lately taken up by him, and who had kindly undertaken the duty of mailman *en passant*, no postal arrangement having been as yet made for this unsettled part of the country.

Among others is one from Fitzgerald, detailing various items of local news, intermixed with business matters. Nothing further had been heard of Ralf or his fellow-criminal Cane, and the pursuit had apparently been given up. It was conjectured that they would endeavour to make their way down to New South Wales, and perhaps join some of the various bushrangers who were infesting the gold-fields of that colony.

Cosgrove senior had taken the matter very much to heart, and had gone to Sydney, after appointing a new superintendent to manage Cambaranga, and it

was supposed that he would return to England. Stone and his father-in-law, Mr Gray, had changed their minds about sending out stock to the new country at present, and would in all probability wait until after the wet season had passed by. Stone and Bessie were enjoying the delights of Sydney. All were well at Ungahrun and at Betyammo.

In a postscript Fitzgerald added that his endeavours to find out further particulars about Miss Bouverie had proved unavailing: all he could learn was that she had accompanied Mr and Mrs Berkeley to Melbourne, and no one knew when they purposed returning.

One letter, from the smallness of its size, escaped his notice until he had finished with the others. To his surprise it was addressed in the handwriting of a lady; and hastily tearing it open to learn the signature, he was no less surprised than enchanted to read the words, "Your affectionate friend Ruth."

She still remembered him, then; and with affection! He was so much pleased with the thought, that some time elapsed before he read his much-longed-for letter. It was dated Sydney, and commenced as follows:—

"My dear Mr John,—You will no doubt be surprised at receiving a letter from me dated as above.

We arrived here about a month ago, and I only discovered your address within the last few days from Mr Cosgrove's Sydney agent, Mr Bond, a very nice man. I do hope you will answer this letter. I am afraid you did not receive the letters which I continued to write to you for some time after your departure, because I never received any in return."

Indeed Ralf had taken care that she should not do so; for, hating the intimacy which he saw existing between John and his half-sister, as he called her —an intimacy which his mind and habits rendered him utterly incapable of participating in—he made it his business to intercept and destroy the few letters which John had written, managing, at the same time, to possess himself of Ruth's correspondence, which uffered a similar fate.

The letter went on to say how sorry she had been to learn that he had left Mr Cosgrove's station, for her step-father spoke of his ingratitude with much bitterness; and although she could not believe him ungrateful, perhaps, if he made her aware of the circumstances, she might mediate, and put things once more in proper train.

She recalled the days of their past lives with much affectionate remembrance; and the whole letter breathed a warm sympathy which, considering the

length of time that had elapsed since they last saw each other, awoke many a cherished feeling in John's breast, and he read and re-read it until he could have repeated it word for word; and on the very first opportunity he wrote a long letter in return, detailing all that had happened to him,—how his letters had remained unanswered, and how his memory of her was as fresh this day as when he last saw her. He could not bear to mention Ralf's name, however; for he knew that by this time she must have learnt the dreadful story, which would have the effect of publishing his crime throughout the land.

Desmard had also a numerous batch of letters, both colonial and English—one of the former containing an advantageous proposal to join, in taking up "new country," a squatter who was under an obligation to the young man's father, and who had only lately learnt of his being in the colony.

The country about them now presented daily evidences of its unsettled state. The travellers pass camps of sheep and cattle spelling on patches of good grass to recruit, or waiting for supplies to proceed further. Every one carried a revolver or carbine. Stories of attacks by blacks—many of them greatly exaggerated—are rife; and the talk is all of taking up and securing country. Rumours fly about fine tracts of hitherto unknown land, of immense areas of downs,

and splendid rivers still farther out, and so on. Empty drays pass downwards on the road to port for supplies. Occasionally a yellow fever-stricken individual pursues his way south to recruit, or is seen doing his "shivers" under some bullock-dray camped beside the road. At length they come to the commencement of the fine country discovered by Stone and his companions, and arrive at the camp of Mr Byng, the gentleman who sold to Fitzgerald the tract of land they intend settling on. Byng himself has brought out stock, and has settled on a portion which became his by lot. It is the very farthest spot of ground occupied by white men.

The cattle are now halted, and left nominally under the charge of Desmard; while Byng rides ahead with John to point out to him the country, and the best road to it. Blucher accompanies them, and greatly amuses his master by the excessive sanguinariness of his disposition. They cross the fresh tracks of blacks frequently, and each time Blucher begs that they may be attacked. John, who is by no means of a blood-thirsty nature, and rather shudders at the idea of a possible encounter with the savages, endeavours to explain that, when no aggression has taken place, the natives must be left alone; but Blucher cannot see things in that light.

"That fellow—rogue, cawbawn no good," he urges.

"What for you yabber (talk) like it that?" asked

John. "Bail (not) that fellow been try to kill you and me."

"Nebber mind," returned the savage youth, his eyes nearly starting out of his head. "Come on; me want to chewt (shoot) him cawbawn (much)."

This amiable desire not being gratified, Blucher would fall back sulkily, evidently setting down John's refusal to a dread of the aboriginals.

They pushed their way over the lovely country which Stone had undergone so much to discover, passing through part of the run about to be stocked by him and Mr Gray; and in about seventy miles they "made" a mountain, from the top of which Byng pointed out, in a general way, the boundaries of that portion of the wilderness which they had come so far to subdue. It was by no means as fine a country as that which they had lately passed over, but seemed well grassed and watered, and was darkly clothed with heavy masses of timber.

John's heart beat high as he silently gazed on the vast territory over which he was to rule as absolute monarch. The future lay wrapped in impenetrable mystery; but whether success or misfortune should be the ultimate result of his labours, of one thing he was determined — no efforts on his part should be wanting to promote a favourable termination to the undertaking.

On returning to camp the march was once more resumed; and at last our hero had the satisfaction of knowing that his nomadic life was at an end for a period. The cattle, although poor and weary, had on the whole made an excellent journey, and the deaths were by no means numerous. John's troubles, however, had only begun. He had calculated on securing the services of some of the men who had driven up the cattle in putting up huts, making a small yard, and in looking after the stock. This he found them ready enough to do, but at such an exorbitant price that no arrangement could be come to. They organised a small trades-union of their own, and united in making demands which West felt, in justice to his partner, he could not accede to. He offered higher wages than were given by any one of the squatters whose stations they had passed. No; they would accept nothing less than what they demanded.

They were well aware that he was alone with his two blackboys—for Desmard had announced his intention of going south. The two boys were not to be depended on, and might bolt home to their tribe the moment the thought entered their heads. Upwards of a thousand head of cattle had to be looked after on a new run in a country infested by wild blacks, the very smell of whom crossing the animals' feeding-ground might stampede them. The wet season was

almost at hand, and a hundred little things had to be attended to, the neglect of which might result in serious loss, and danger to life. But they stuck to their decision, and rode off in a body,—for John had resolved to perish rather than to submit to their extortionate demands.

In this strait Desmard's manly generous disposition showed itself. He flew from one to another, arguing, persuading, and upbraiding by turns, but in vain; and finally, relinquishing his own intended journey, he made known to John his intention of sticking to him until the end of the wet season should bring fresh men in search of employment. It was useless that the departing drovers reminded him that a long stretch of unoccupied country lay between him and the nearest habitation, and that in their company he might traverse it in safety: he merely turned his back contemptuously on the speakers, muttering to himself—

"I—ah—would not be seen in—ah—the company of—ah—such a set of native dogs."

So they went away, and John grasped, with gratitude in his heart, the hand of the brave young fellow, whose faithful, honest help was, notwithstanding his inexperience, invaluable at such a time.

Not a moment could now be lost. Everything depended on themselves, for a large river and several

wide creeks, which, in a short time, would be flowing deep and rapid, intervened between them and Byng's station. The cattle were turned loose on some fine grass in the space formed by the junction of two large creeks, and all hands set to work to build a bark-hut. This had to be done during the hours which could be spared from looking after the cattle. Each morning, by daylight, the horses were brought up, and all hands went round the farthest tracks made by the scattered herd.

Desmard was on these occasions always accompanied by one of the boys, for John feared that he might get bushed; but he himself, and the other boy, went separately.

The creatures were inclined, on the whole, to stay, and chose out two or three shady camps to which they nearly all resorted as the sun became strong. On these camps it was their custom to lie until about four in the afternoon, when they would gradually draw off in all directions, feeding through the entire night. Many calved about this time, and such as did so usually "took" to the vicinity of the place where the calves were dropped. Some of the leaders, however, caused much anxiety and trouble, owing to their determination to make back to Cambaranga, and a strict look-out had to be kept that they did not get away unobserved. Day by day the cattle on the camps were gone

through, and absent ones noted and searched for until found. In this duty the blackboys were simply invaluable; and their interest in the work, and untiring skill in tracking, contributed chiefly to the success which attended the pioneers in keeping the herd together. No sooner did a mob of cattle make a start, than some one in going round the "outside tracks" was sure to discover the fact, and instant pursuit never failed to result in the return of the deserters. The horses gave less trouble, and contentedly stuck to a well-grassed flat near the camp.

The departure of his men gave John no time to seek a suitable situation for a head-station, and the approaching wet weather warned him to make hasty preparations against it. His tents had been destroyed by a fire which took place some time before, during his absence from the camp, owing to the carelessness of the cook in not burning the grass around his galley. The tarpaulin was needed for the stores, and he was therefore under the necessity of building a hut. Setting to work with Desmard, he soon had the frame up, while the boys endeavoured to cut bark. This latter proved to be a peculiarly difficult job, owing to the season of the year. When the ground is full of moisture, the trees are also full of sap, and most kinds of bark come off easily; but in dry or frosty weather, when the sap is in the ground, the very opposite is

the case. The method of stripping bark is as follows: A straight-barrelled trunk is selected, and a ring cut round it near the ground, and another about six feet higher up. A long cut is then made perpendicularly, joining the two rings, and the edge of it is prised up with the tomahawk, until a grasp of the bark can be got with the hand. If inclined to come off, the whole sheet strips with a pleasant tearing sound, and is laid flat on the ground to dry, with a log as a weight above it. In two or three days the sheet becomes somewhat contracted in size, but lighter and tougher, and thoroughly impervious to moisture. It is used in many ways. It makes a capital roof, and for temporary walls of huts it is excellent. Bunks to sleep on, tables, and other articles of furniture, are improvised from it, and, on a new station, nothing is more useful.

Owing to the long dry season, the boys found bark-stripping exceedingly arduous work; and after exhausting all the artifices used by natives in the task, barely enough was secured to cover in the roof of the little hut. One gable-end was shut up by a portion of a partly-destroyed tent, the other by a couple of raw hides tied up across it. The walls were of saplings, stuck into the ground side by side, and confined against the wall-plate by another long straight sapling. When finished, the little hut was certainly not much to look at, but the builders congratulated each

other on having a roof of some sort over their heads; and in the not improbable event of an attack by blacks, it would prove a shelter in some degree. With this object in view, and to prevent their movements inside being detected through the interstices of the saplings by the sharp eyes of the prowling savages, all the spare bags and pieces of old blanketing which could be procured were fastened around the walls.

They had barely completed this apology for a dwelling when the tropical rain commenced, apparently timing its arrival to a day. Down it poured, in one continuous deluge, for hours. It was almost invariably heralded by thunderstorms, and beginning in the afternoon, lasted till evening. This permitted them for a couple of weeks to make their usual grand tour around the cattle; but as the rains extended their period of duration, the ground became exceedingly boggy, and the cattle were, perforce, obliged to remain about the sound sandy country on which their instinct led them to select their camps.

During the short intervals of hot, steaming, fine weather, the pioneers would endeavour to go through the herd; but the undertaking was toilsome and severe. Plodding on foot through the heavy black soil or soft boggy country, from one hard sandy tract to another, — for in such places riding was out of the question,—they would lead the plunging, sweating

horses along a few steps at a time. Water lay in great lagoons over the surface of the country, covered with flocks of duck and ibis. The grass grew rank and long, and sorely impeded their movements. It was, moreover, by no means a pleasant reflection that, should they, when thus singly toiling through these swampy bogs, drop across a party of aboriginals (than which nothing was more likely), certain death would ensue, bringing with it disaster upon the rest of the little party.

As it was utterly impossible to muster and make a count of the cattle, John was obliged to content himself with paying occasional visits to them; but notwithstanding that a marked improvement was visible in the condition of those he saw, the anxiety told heavily upon him.

Apart from the miseries of mosquitoes, sand-flies, and blight-flies, the little community passed their spare time pleasantly together; and Desmard manufactured a chessboard of a piece of bark, marking its squares with charcoal, and he and John fought many a good fight on it with their primitive-looking men. John also took much pains to instruct his friend in the art of cutting out and plaiting stock-whips from the salted hides,—an accomplishment which the latter picked up rapidly, besides acquiring much other practical knowledge; and he was afterwards accustomed

to say, that the necessity for exertion brought about during his pioneering with John, and the self-reliance thus gained, had made a different man of him.

Game was on the whole scarce. Plain turkeys and ducks were numerous, but the kangaroos had been kept under by the aboriginals, whose old camps lay thick around the hut. It certainly surprised the white men that the natives never made their appearance openly. Sometimes Blucher or Gunpowder would detect their tracks in the neighbourhood of the hut, but as yet they probably entertained a superstitious awe of the owners of so many huge horned animals.

The rain continued to deluge the flat country about the little head-station, and the creeks began to overflow their banks. The wet soaked up through the floor of their abode. The walls were covered with a green slimy fur. Even the inside of the gun-barrels, cleaned the night before, took on this kind of rust. Percussion-caps and priming had to be renewed every day. Minor trials and discomforts were also not wanting. The close, damp weather, causing the flour to heat, bred in it innumerable weevils; and the supply of tea and sugar failing (much having been destroyed by wet), the party had to depend chiefly upon the everlasting salt junk, eked out with what they could shoot. At last fever began to make its unwelcome appearance, and John, whose mind was most har-

assed, became the first victim. No proper medicine being to hand or procurable, he accordingly suffered much.

It was miserable at this time to look out of doors at night. Far and wide nothing could be seen in the bleak clouded moonlight but water, through which the grass stalks reared their dismal heads in the most melancholy manner, and a dark mass of trees occupied the background. The croak, croak of the frogs was sometimes broken by the distant bellow of a beast as it called to its fellows.

The occupants of this little outpost of civilisation were indeed isolated from all others. For countless miles to the north none of their race intervened between them and the Indian Ocean. To the west a still more dreary and still wider expanse of unknown territory ran. To the east, a *bêche-de-mer* station or two along the coast alone broke the otherwise inhospitable character of the shore. Southwards, for nearly three hundred miles, the blacks were still kept out like wild beasts; and their nearest neighbours, seventy miles away, were not in a much more enviable plight than themselves.

The incessant rains now caused the floods to increase, and gradually the backwater approached the little dwelling. The bullock-dray had sunk so deep in the soft soil that there was no hope of shifting it

until fine weather came, and in any case the working bullocks could not have been mustered. Nearer and nearer rose the water. The country behind them for several miles was perfectly level. Rations were stowed away on the rafters, and preparations made to strengthen the little hut, when fortunately the waters subsided.

Day by day John's fever increased, and matters began to look very gloomy, when a change in the weather took place. It became possible to move about, and the cattle were found to be all right. One or two men pushed their way out in search of employment, and were at once engaged. Medicine was procured, and John speedily improved as his spirits rose. The blackboys, who had undergone suffering and privation in the most cheerful manner during the wet season, now revelled in sunshine, and their camp-fire at night resounded with hilarious laughter or never-ending *corroborrees*. The horses had grown fat, notwithstanding the attacks of their enemies the flies, and now kicked like Jeshurun when ridden. Numbers of young calves could also be seen in every mob of cattle, necessitating the erection of a branding-yard. Rations were borrowed, pending the arrival of supplies ordered previously, and soon neighbours began to settle around, and a travelling mob or two passed by. Desmard took his leave of John with much regret on

both sides, their acquaintance having ripened into firm friendship, and started on their southern journey. A proper site for a head-station was decided on, and before long a small though comfortable little cottage sheltered our hero, while a small stock-yard and paddock afforded convenience in working the run.

About three months after the close of the wet weather, Stone arrived on his country, bringing with him upwards of 10,000 sheep. He was accompanied by Bessie, who could not be prevailed upon to stay behind. They travelled much in the same manner as did John with his cattle, but not having the same necessity for economy, they were provided with many little luxuries and conveniences, which rendered the journey more endurable.

The sheep camped in a body at night, and at daylight were divided roughly into mobs of about 1500, which were driven along the road by the shepherds. Much annoyance was sometimes caused by the unaccountable stupidity of a few of the drovers, who never failed to take the wrong road when such an opportunity presented itself. Others distinguished themselves by dropping mobs of sheep in the long grass, many animals being thus irretrievably lost. On the whole, however, the quietness which characterised the camp at night compensated for the labours of the day. Bessie's light-hearted gaiety and continual good-

humour made all around her happy, and she bore the hardships of the first few months in her new home most uncomplainingly. Much had to be effected. Yards and huts had to be built for the sheep and shepherds. A head-station had to be erected. Supplies were wanted, and had to be brought up, and a paddock was also necessary. Preparations for the various lambings were urgent, and arrangements for shearing had to be considered. It was no easy time. A scarcity of labour was constantly followed by a demand for increased wages. The positions of master and servant became often inverted, and the latter sometimes gratified his malice by taking his departure when his services were most required.

John had a busy time likewise. The facility of moving about offered to them by the fine weather induced his cattle to stray. Hunting-parties of aboriginals crossed their feeding-grounds, causing some of the mobs to start and leave the run, and occasionally a few spears were thrown at the frightened animals.

John would willingly have paid several beasts yearly to the original possessors of his country, were it possible by such means to purchase their goodwill; for the damage done by a few blacks walking across their pasture can scarcely be appreciated by those who are unacquainted with the natural habits of cattle.

Negotiations, however, would have been fruitless, and watchfulness was his only remedy. A single start sufficed to make the creatures alarmed and suspicious for weeks. Continually on the look-out for their enemies, they took fright and rushed for miles without stopping, on the occurrence of the slightest unaccustomed noise; and even the smell of Gunpowder or Blucher, when passing on horseback, was sufficient to cause a mob to raise their heads inquiringly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LILIANFIELD—FETCHING A DOCTOR—A RAID OF THE MYALLS.

THE months flew round, shearing had come and gone, and things were beginning to assume a more homely appearance on "Lilianfield," as Stone had called his station in compliment to his wife's mother, whose Christian name was Lilian. John frequently rode over and spent a day or two with his friends, and Bessie was obliged to him for many little acts of courtesy and kindness which carried with them a tenfold value under the circumstances. He it was who took care that Lilianfield should never want milking-cows, which it probably would often have done but for him. This is saying a good deal; for it almost always happens that on sheep-stations milk is a rare article, time and expense forbidding the luxuries of the dairy. He it was who continued to send over a welcome change to the everlasting mutton, in the shape of choice pieces of beef whenever slaughtering

day came round; and many other little attentions he was enabled to show his old friends, who became much attached to him, and reciprocated his kindness.

One piece of loving devotion, indeed, Stone never could forget, and Bessie ever after spoke of it with tears in her eyes. The wet weather was about commencing, and having a few idle days before him, John promised himself the pleasure of spending them at Lilianfield. As not unfrequently happened, they were short of men there, and consequently everybody was unusually busy; and in addition to this, the man and woman in the kitchen (having for some unexplained reason taken offence) had left a few days before. This was the more distressing, for Bessie's confinement was shortly expected, and she and her husband depended much upon the assistance of the woman in question. Another female attendant had been sent for, but had not arrived, and Stone feared that she could not do so in time, for the creeks were swollen with the rains which had already fallen, and were at present impassable for all except daring swimmers.

It was dark when John rode up, for he had made a late start, and the rain fell heavily as he dismounted from his horse. The usually cheerful little place wore a garb of desolation. Bessie's bright cheerful face was not there with her gay welcome. He was soon informed of the cause by his distressed

friend, who looked upon him as a Heaven-sent helper. Bessie had been suddenly taken ill, and there was no one to assist her but her half-distracted husband. It did not take John long to decide upon his course of action. About fifty miles away, near Byng's station, a little township had been formed. John was aware that a very skilful although dissipated surgeon had settled there, and he determined to go for him in spite of all obstacles. Hastily eating some food, he caught two of Stone's best horses, and soon he was on the banks of the river. It was moonlight, but through the cold dismal light John could discern the yellow turbid current foaming and churning its broad deep belt between him and the further shore, which he could but indistinctly make out. He never hesitated. Spurring his horse, he plunged in at a considerable distance higher up than the crossing. In a moment the cold water is up to his armpits, and his horses are snorting and puffing away, their heads only visible above the surface. It needs all his skill to keep them from making down stream, and at the same time save himself from capsizing. His head becomes giddy as the flying water sweeps past him. Suddenly his horse strikes against a snag, and wildly rearing, falls backwards on the rider, who, in case of accidents, has been sitting with his feet out of the stirrup-irons. Under they go together; all is blackness and confusion; at last he rises to the

surface, separated from his steed. Swush!—the current fiercely sweeps him along, and the horses follow him at a fearful pace. He is afraid of their disabling him with a stroke of their fore-feet, and turning, he splashes the water in their faces. This has the effect of frightening them a little; and as they pass him he succeeds in laying hold of the mane of one of them, and swimming alongside, with much exertion he at last gains the longed-for shore. The other animal (his saddle-horse) makes the bank some distance down. Everything is right, with the exception of one stirrup-leather which is missing, probably torn off by the river snags. He is wet, cold, and miserable, but he does not mind it. Fifty long miles, and three or four swollen creeks, smaller certainly, but not less disagreeable, lie between him and his destination; but he heeds not the distance or the danger, and soon he is cantering along the road, slipping and bogging at times, but pushing on with one object in his heart.

In spite of the rain, of swollen creeks and difficult travelling, John arrived at the township. As he expected, the doctor refused to come. John patiently sat a short time, drank some grog with him, listened to a yarn or two, and at last excited the maudlin admiration of the inebriated practitioner to such a degree, that his desire to return in John's company became as vehement as the other could have wished.

Packing up the doctor's travelling medical-case, for he was too far gone to attend to it himself, and getting a fresh supply of grog for the road, John started. Once mounted, the doctor was in no humour for delay. A fresh draught now and then from the bottle kept the steam up, and with the aid of fresh horses kindly lent by the officer in charge of a "native mounted police" station, recently erected near the road, they arrived by sundown at the river opposite Lilianfield. A couple of drays are camped near to the crossing, and quite a young lagoon of rain-water is lying in the hollows of each of the huge black tarpaulins which cover them. As they ride up, a savage-looking half-bred bulldog yelps hoarsely, and two or three men creep out from underneath the tarpaulin of the nearest dray, where they have been playing "Anty-up" (a favourite game with cards) for tobacco. John recognises a teamster who has been employed by himself.

"Good evening, Mick," he says; "how's the river?"

"Very high still," answers Mick, "but falling. It fell a good three feet since last night. You're not thinking of going across, are you?"

"Oh yes," returns John; "must cross."

"Then," says Mick, "you might let Mr Stone know that the woman he sent for, and her husband, are camped here with me. They're there," he added, nodding with his head in the direction of the other waggon.

"All right—but I'll be back again to-night;" and with that, John and the doctor moved on.

They crossed the river once more: the force of the current, though still strong, had abated greatly, and they arrived safely to John's relief. With the assistance of a station hand or two, and his friends at the bullock-waggons, the wise woman was ferried over the dangerous stream in a washing-tub, protesting all the time with much clamour that "she was a-going fur to be drownded; she know'd she was;" but the exhilarating effects of sundry long swigs at a square bottle of gin, and the force of her own compassionate though slightly rough nature, bore her triumphantly through in safety. The long ride had produced an unusual degree of sobriety in the doctor, and by judicious management, he was kept in a proper state of temperance, until every danger had passed by, and Bessie was pronounced to be in a fair way to recovery.

As before said, John frequently rode over to Lilianfield during the wet weather; and with the intuitive quickness of her sex, Bessie guessed before long his love for some one; and he at last confided to her his secret, feeling much relieved in being able to talk about Ruth to one who could understand his feelings.

How different was the aspect of things this wet season compared with the last!

Stations were formed for nearly a hundred and fifty

miles outside John's run, and he began to regard himself as quite an inside squatter. His neighbours greatly assisted him in keeping his cattle together, turning them back, and sending over notice whenever they were discovered making away; and, in like manner, he performed the same good office for them. Things soon began to wear quite a settled look.

He had also been most fortunate in his relations with the blacks. From the outset it had been his principle to leave them unmolested unless provoked to adopt severer measures; and he had been enabled as yet to keep them away without bloodshed. A more intimate acquaintance with the ways and customs of the whites had produced a certain amount of contempt for them among the Myalls; and here and there a murder of a white man or two in the district, or a wholesale spearing of cattle, announced that a war of aggression, and also of retaliation, had commenced. Indeed the behaviour of some of the whites was reprehensible in the highest degree; and a few of the more brutal spirits thought as little of "knocking over a nigger" at sight as they would have done of shooting a kangaroo.

This was, however, far from being a general feeling; and notwithstanding the charges brought against the pioneer squatters in the southern newspapers, by, for the most part, ignorant and sentimental writers, those

who were acquainted with them, and with the dangers and provocations of their daily lives, will admit that the greater number acted with temperate forbearance towards those tribes of aboriginals with whom they came in contact.

It was indeed both instructive and amusing to investigate the surroundings of some of those who espoused most loudly the cause of the "poor black." Some were comfortably settled southern squatters, whose fathers or predecessors had once been pioneers themselves, and who, in bequeathing to their followers the country they had wrested from the original inhabitants, had, along with it, transmitted to them a complicity and share in any injustice and guilt exercised in its acquisition. Others were blatant town politicians, anxious to develop the "resources of the country," who, by neglecting no opportunity of furthering immigration, discovering new gold-fields, and exploring fresh pastoral country, urged the energetic white men to seek their fortunes in places where they must of necessity come in contact with their black brethren, —a contact which history shows to have been ever attended with conflict.

A few were ministers of the Gospel, who, although shaking their heads in sorrowful disapproval of the manner in which the "poor blacks" were driven from their hunting-grounds in order to make room for the

white man's sheep, never hesitated to acquire, if possible, on favourable terms, land thus appropriated,—or who were to be seen, armed with carbine or pistol, making their way from one little bush community to another, for the purpose of collecting money. The majority, however, were well-meaning men, but thoroughly ignorant of the state of matters, and of the real feelings and behaviour of most of those whose actions they condemned.

Things, as we have said, bore a cheerful and bright aspect; and the rapidly increasing number of his young stock led our hero to look forward hopefully to the time when he might clear off the heavy debt which at present embarrassed him, and settle down into a breeder of pure stock, after the manner of his friend Fitzgerald. Stone had also done very well: his lambings had been good,—indeed they could hardly have been otherwise on the splendid country he owned; but the heavy expense of carriage, wages, &c., materially affected his profit. He felt that the roughness of the life was by no means suited to his young wife, and he made up his mind to sell Lilianfield on the first fair offer.

In pursuance of this scheme he had started on a trip down to the coast to meet a would-be purchaser, leaving Bessie with her infant at home. A married overseer, whose wife attended to the cooking, resided

in a cottage close by, and Bessie's plucky heart would not permit her to detain her husband from his important business. The overseer was a good enough servant under the direction of his master, but foolhardy, and totally incapable of being intrusted with any charge by himself. Stone left with the intention of returning in about ten days, or twelve at the most.

Everything was safe; there seemed no possibility of anything going wrong at home; and if Bessie was in want of advice or help of any sort, she could send over for John.

So thinking, and hoping the result of his journey would render all fears unnecessary in future, Stone had started. John had been made aware of his friend's intended absence, and would have ridden over to see Bessie, but had been prevented owing to the sudden appearance of blacks on his run, who not only disturbed his cattle, but speared a number of them, and, among others, a valuable herd bull.

He had just returned from viewing the remains of the slain animals, and was sitting musing on the best course to pursue, when Stone's blackboy, a little fellow about twelve years old, dashed up on a reeking horse.

"Missa Wess, black fellow kill 'em altogether. White fellow 'long o' Lillanfill!"

"What name?" (what do you say?) roared John, jumping up.

"Yohi," said the boy, still sitting on his horse, "altogether bong" (dead), "one fellow bail bong" (one not dead).

"Which one bail bong?" demanded John, in terror.

"Missis bail bong, ony cawbawn prighten" (Missis not dead, only dreadfully frightened).

"Blucher!" vociferated John at the top of his voice. (Gunpowder had been sent home to his tribe at his special request.)

Blucher appeared in a moment. He had grown to be a smart, active, intelligent lad, with his energies always strung to the utmost, as if waiting to dash forward and execute his master's orders as soon as communicated.

"Blucher," said John, "black fellow kill him white fellow."

Blucher's eyes glistened and started forward, the whites of them becoming ominously bloodshot.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Along o' Lilianfield. Get up the horses."

In a moment Bluey was mounted upon the other boy's horse; and soon gathering up the paddocked horses, he caught and saddled his own and his master's.

Arming himself with Snider and revolver, and providing his attendant with the same, John mounted, and with his two companions was soon galloping to-

wards the scene of the disaster. As they proceeded, the usually smiling downs seemed to tell a tale of horror and bloodshed. Between the road and the blue mountain-ranges a huge bush-fire raged fiercely, the smuts from which, though many miles away, floated down upon them as they tore along. The sky was lurid, and a dull roar struck their ears, intimating the extent and fury of the conflagration.

Blucher spurs alongside of his master, and points out that the road is covered with naked footprints. Presently they come across scattered mobs of sheep, apparently lost, and approach a sheep-station hut, to which the flock evidently belongs. John, still at a gallop, turns off the road to examine the hut, and Blucher draws his carbine, looking about him eagerly.

Yes; it is just as the blackboy expected. There lies one old shepherd on his face, across the threshold of the door, pierced by a couple of spears, and his head ghastly with tomahawk-wounds.

John does not feel at all surprised. Somehow it seems quite natural. He has no time to do anything at present, and is about riding away, when the little boy calls from the gateway of one of the yards—

"Here 'nother one white fellow."

Yes, so there is,—it is the mate of the first man. He lies doubled across a log, his head battered in in a most frightful manner, his old blue-serge shirt thick

with gore, the jagged "nullah-nullah" which had been used in the atrocious deed broken on the ground near him.

"Come along!" shouts John, and once more he is hastening on towards Lilianfield.

As he dashes up to the door of the barred-up house, it opens, and Bessie rushes out dishevelled and pale, with her infant in her arms. She holds out her hand, but she cannot utter a word, and John has to lead her to a seat, where her feelings relieve themselves in a flood of tears. As soon as she could speak, she explained to John that soon after her husband left, the overseer had met some blacks on the run, and in opposition to the treatment adopted towards them by Stone, he had encouraged them about the head-station. For a few days they had behaved themselves with propriety; but Bessie, fearful for the life of herself and child, had barricaded the house she resided in, and determined to await her husband's return. The overseer and his wife, on the contrary, saw no danger, and the woman could not be persuaded to sleep in the same house with Bessie. What occasioned the outbreak Bessie did not know, but a number of savages made a rush upon the unfortunate woman, killing her at once. They then tried to enter the house in which she herself dwelt, and were only deterred upon her firing two or three shots from her husband's revolver,

which, urged by desperation, notwithstanding her total ignorance and dread of firearms, she succeeded in doing. The little blackboy had been away playing in the creek; and frightened by the wild shouts, which enabled him to guess what was being enacted, he lay hidden among the long-bladed grass tussocks until night, when, stealing out quietly, he made his way to the house, and finding his mistress alive, was directed by her to seek out John.

Bessie had seen nothing of the overseer, and feared that he had also paid for his foolhardiness with his life.

John soon made up his mind as to what had to be done. Writing a hasty note requesting the presence of the detachment urgently, he despatched the boy to the "officer in charge of the native mounted police barracks," near Byng's station, trusting that he might not be absent on patrol. Inditing another to the manager of an adjoining sheep-station, he put it into the hands of Blucher, instructing him to return with all haste.

He then set to work to dig a grave for the poor woman who had fallen a victim to the bloodthirsty aboriginals, with Bessie, whose nerves were dreadfully shaken, for a companion. So much occupied was he, that he did not hear her joyous exclamation of surprise as her husband galloped up furiously, and

springing off his horse, folded her to his heart; and his happiness was scarcely less than Bessie's when Stone stepped to the edge of the grave and called to him. Something had made Stone uneasy—what it was he could not say; but without waiting to finish his business he had hurried back, unable to rest until he had once more seen his wife and child. As he drew near his home his vague fears grew stronger, and the smoke-laden atmosphere seemed to fill him with a dread, to which the body of the overseer, lying a mutilated trunk on the road, gave only too fearful a reality.

All was well now, however, Bessie thought; and that evening, late, they had plenty of assistance in the shape of the Super of the run to which John had sent Blucher, who came over with three or four men.

Next morning early, Stone put Bessie in the buggy, and started over with her for the friendly manager's dwelling, where he had arranged she should remain for a week or two. John and the rest busied themselves in burying the overseer and the poor shepherds, and in collecting the sheep, which, fortunately, had remained in the vicinity of the yard. These they left in charge of three of the men, well armed, and then returned to Lilianfield head-station.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BLACK TROOPERS—PURSUIT AND ATTACK.

THEY had not been long back when two or three laden pack-horses passed the window, and, going to the door, they saw a body of ten native troopers drawn up in a line, and heard the command, "Dismount," from the officer in charge, who thereupon came up and shook hands with John and his friend, with whom he was a favourite. He was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years of age, by birth an Irishman, very gentlemanly in his manners, and of good family. Judicious and firm in the management of his command, he was one of the best officers in the service of Government, and his tact in managing his boys prevented desertions and kept them in a state of constant efficiency. He had been transferred to his present district from a barracks near a large gold-field, where a slight *hauteur* of manner had rendered him somewhat unpopular among the roughs, who believe in the glorious maxim of "Liberty, fraternity, and equality."

"Very glad to meet you, West, but sorry for the occasion. Nothing happened to Mrs Stone, I trust? I don't see her about."

"No, thank God!" said John; and he gave a short account of what had occurred.

"Ah! just so," returned the mounted trooper; one-half of the murders are occasioned by foolhardiness and an overweening trust in the generosity of the blacks. I'll just walk down and see the rations served out, and return." So saying, he walked down to where his men had erected their tents.

Stone returned late in the evening; but as he felt the urgent need of looking after his other shepherds, and as their friend the superintendent could not longer spare the time from his own business, it was arranged that John alone should accompany the troopers in their pursuit. To tell the truth, John was not sorry for the opportunity thus afforded of striking wholesome terror into the tribe, which, notwithstanding his peaceful behaviour towards them, was beginning to cause him serious trouble and loss.

The troopers were, of course, delighted at the prospect of a collision with their countrymen, and an unusual degree of activity prevailed in the camp, —so much so, that next morning before sunrise, while Stone and his guest were getting through their hasty breakfast, the corporal of the troop made his appear-

ance at the door, and stiffening himself into an erect military attitude, saluted gravely, reporting at the same time, "Every sing all righ, Mahmy."[1]

"Very good, Howard," returned his superior, whose name was Blake.

All were soon in readiness to start, and Blucher brought up his master's horse and his own, his eyes glistening with envy as he noted "the pomp and circumstance of glorious war" which attended the marshalling of his sable brethren.

The black troopers presented a very warlike and efficient front, as they stood up in line, each one by his horse's head, awaiting the order to mount.

The blue jackets, with their red collars and cuffs, became the dark complexions exceedingly well, and their wild faces were brought out into fierce relief by their curtained white cap-covers. White riding-trousers and serviceable leggings protected their extremities, and black leathern belts with large cartridge-pouches hung across their shoulders. Under each saddle lay a large blue military saddle-cloth bound with red. A change of clothing and a blanket, rolled in a strong piece of American duck, were strapped over the pommel of their saddles, and a Snider carbine hung on the right side.

[1] Mahmy or Mammie, the name given by black police to their officers.

Blake took his horse from the orderly who stood holding it, and walking forward a little, quietly gave the command—

"Prepare to mount—mount,"—motioning them at the same time in the direction in which they themselves knew they had to go.

After the first hundred yards the men broke the stiff cavalry order which they at first preserved, and rode at ease—two being, however, specially detailed to look after the pack-horses bearing the rations and spare ammunition, with the tents of the troop.

John and Blake brought up the rear at some distance.

The sub-inspector was a good-looking young man, with refined features and a dark complexion. A short moustache shaded the upper lip, and an occasional lisp gave a piquancy to his modulated voice, indicating a boyishness which its owner was far from possessing. He wore no uniform, with the exception of a white-covered forage-cap; but his horse was accoutred in a similar manner to that of his men, and in addition he wore a revolver in his belt. They made their way towards the sheep-station where the unfortunate shepherds had been killed—all the tracks having been ascertained to run in that direction. It soon turned out, from examination of circumstances, that the men were slaughtered merely because, in their retreat, the blacks had happened to drop across them.

Blake now halted his men, and ordered two to the front for the purpose of following up tracks, desiring the others to keep behind him and John with the pack-horses. It would have been a work of some difficulty to trace the retreating mob from the hut, owing to the bush-fire which had swept over the country, but for the fact that the tracks of two or three who had lagged behind were discovered making over the burnt ground after their tribe.

The soft, powdered, black and grey *débris* of the long grass revealed the naked footprints distinctly; and steadily the advanced-guard followed them over the wide plain, and on to the banks of the river, where it issued from the hilly country, nearly fifteen miles above Lilianfield, and not very much farther from John's own run.

The tracks were two days old, and the boys pushed on rapidly but cautiously — eagerly listening to the slightest sound, and examining, with the most careful scrutiny, the leaves and twigs disturbed by the light-heeled Myalls in their retreat. Nothing escaped them; and whenever an important fact was discovered tending to throw light upon the particular tribe of blacks, or their numbers, or motives, the trooper who observed it would ride up and report the matter to his officer.

In about five miles farther they came upon a deserted

camp. The numerous fires proved that it had been occupied by a large number of natives; and the bark gunyahs, and the heaps of ashes, denoted that they had resided in it for some time. Many trees were stripped of their bark in the neighbourhood, and beaten paths ran down to the water. Circular ovens, formed of large stones, for roasting meat, were in plenty; and here and there the presence of bullock-bones told John that his herd had supplied the camp with several good feeds. Smaller heaps of grey ashes, and heaps of mussel-shells surrounding the main hearth, pointed out where the warrior's wives and children had slept around him; and in the neighbourhood of each lay a big round stone or two, for the purpose of pounding up the kernels of the nuts, whose husks lay in small piles about the camp. A few broken gourds, a broken spear or two, and a cracked *coolaman*,[1] were to be seen here and there; and small irregular pieces of the soft, thick bark of the ti-tree were scattered round the fires, on one or two of which a brand still smouldered.

The detachment halted and camped for the night about a mile farther on. There was a certain amount of romance about the pursuit of the savages, which awoke a sentiment of pleasure in John's nature; and the feeling of being the hunter was much more agree-

[1] Native vessel for fetching water.

able than that of being the hunted one—a position which, in connection with this very tribe, he had experienced several times.

The night was bright and clear, and the moon was at the full. The fire-lights falling upon the stacked carbines and military accoutrements, formed a fitting background for the circle of wild-eyed and fiercely whiskered and moustached troopers, and gave a picturesqueness to the camp. Blucher sat in the centre, an entranced listener to endless stories, the drift of which John could guess from the oft-repeated sounds of "Poo'oh, poo'oh,"—as the narrator imitated the firing of carbines, amid roars of laughter from the rest. John shared Blake's tent;—their conversation was prolonged until near midnight, and on going outside before preparing for sleep, they were astonished to find that a total eclipse of the moon had taken place. The boys were all asleep, but were soon awakened by the orderly who answered Blake's summons. They stared at the moon in wonder, and discussed matters in awe-struck whispers.

"Ask them," said Blake, "what has occasioned this darkness."

The man left, and after some time returned, saying the rest were unanimous that the "devil-devil" had caused it, in order the more easily to catch 'possums.

"No doubt," returned Blake; and soon John and he were fast asleep.

Next morning all hands were in their saddles by sunrise, and the pursuit was recommenced. The travelling was in some places very difficult, it being necessary to cross the river frequently, owing to the tortuous nature of its course; and the fording of the stream was made very dangerous by the large rocks and slippery boulders which lay in its bed, causing the horses to stumble or their shod hoofs to slide. The numerous tracks in the river-sand plainly showed that the main body of the retreating natives had followed the water-course; and the peculiar smell from the small fresh-burnt patches of river-grass here and there, told that they could not be very far away. Camps of small parties, all making after the main mob, were frequently found; and the heaps of mussel-shells, fish-bones, and remains of fresh-water turtle about them, proved that it did not take them long to provide a liberal supply of food for a mid-day meal. That they were in dread of being chased was evident by the long stages between their principal resting-places. The troopers' excitement now gave them much the air of kangaroo-hounds looking about for their game; and one of them, after staring fixedly ahead of him for some time, rode up and reported that he saw a camp-smoke in the distance. Blake now

called a halt, and took the opinion of the troop. They were all keen bushmen, and acquainted with every artifice of bush warfare.

"Do you all see the smoke, boys?" inquired Blake.

"Yes, sir; good way ovah dere," answered the corporal, Howard, a large-bodied, active, bloodthirsty-looking man, with a long drooping moustache. John followed Blake's gaze, and shaking his head slowly from side to side, in imitation of the troopers, was thereby enabled clearly to discover a faint column of smoke rising afar off. They now proceeded more cautiously, passing as they did some places where, from the fresh wood-shavings from newly-made nullah-nullahs, and recently-cut holes in trees covered with 'possum-hair or owls' feathers, they felt assured the tribe had passed that morning early. Numbers of crows also indicated that the offenders were not far ahead, these birds always following in the wake of a native camp.

Blake once more commanded a halt, and ordering two of his most intelligent boys to strip naked, he sent them ahead to scout, their uncovered forage-caps, however, being carried in their belts, to serve if necessary as distinction between them and the Myalls.

Pushing rapidly onwards, the spies disappeared in the forest, and the troop moved slowly after them. In about an hour's time they were met returning, and in excited whispers reported that they had come in sight

of the wild men's camp. They further stated that their presence had been observed by the watchful eyes of one of the natives, who, however, mistook them in the distance for two of his own companions, signalling to them with his hand to join him, which they, however, managed to avoid; and under the pretence of looking for *chewgah-bag*, they made their way into the river-bed, and thence back to the troop.

A rapid description of the situation of the camp enabled Blake to make a proper disposition of his men in attacking it. The Myalls were, it appeared, settled for the night in the sandy bed of the river, which there flowed between the rocky eminences, densely clothed with scrub.

First of all dismounting and turning out the horses, the troopers stripped themselves of everything but their shirts, caps, and cartridge-belts.

Then addressing them shortly, Blake rehearsed his plan of attack. Four boys were to advance stealthily on each side through the scrub and occupy the rocky heights. One of the four on each side was then to make his way to the river-banks, taking the camp in rear. As soon as these had effected a junction they were to advance, driving, if possible, the unsuspecting savages down the river into the teeth of Blake and John, who, with the two other troopers, were to bear the brunt of the shock.

This arrangement being thoroughly understood, the party started on foot, and shortly afterwards the faint cooeys and shouts told them that the cruel murderers were all gathered together and resting after the toils of the chase, which, notwithstanding the rapidity of the retreat, they had not neglected. The thick bushes and shrubs growing in the river afforded a shelter to the small party who there awaited the signal which was to tell them that the camp was surrounded and the hour of retribution arrived.

At last it came. Boom—boom, broke upon the still evening air, and in a moment the river-gorge resounded with the wild war-cries of the men and the terrified clamour of the women and children.

"Look out, West! here they come," shouts Blake, as a dozen black figures, with hideous features under their streaming locks, burst upon them, armed with spears and nullah-nullahs.

Bang—bang, go a couple of carbines, and two of them drop on their tracks.

"Hu—hu—hu—hu—prrrrrrr!—hah—hu—hu—hio—prrrrrrr!" yell the Myalls, sending two or three volleys of spears and boomerangs at their unexpected assailants.

They have as yet had no experience of the superiority of the white man's weapons, and make a stand for a little, but they soon perceive that it is futile. Here and

there the carbines crack among the rocks and bushes, and at last cease. The black fellows have succeeded in getting away or in hiding themselves in the crevices of the rocks. Blake and his party advance to examine the camp. As they go along, Howard, the corporal, who has distinguished himself particularly, almost stumbles over a little, fat, round pickaninny (child) rolled up in a bundle of bark; and picking it up hastily, he carries it along with him. Here are a group of ugly old black hags on the ground, clamorously yelling, and gashing their heads with sharp stones. "It is a pity," says Blake pointing to them, "that their sex prevents their punishment; they are always the instigators of any outrage committed by the men." Howard deposits the infant in the lap of one of them, admonishing her to look after it and cease her roaring, and makes off to join his fellows in pursuit of other male blacks. Everywhere are children and gins sitting among the bushes, or endeavouring to steal away with all they can muster together. Ordering a trooper to collect them and stand sentry, Blake directs John's attention to a couple of buckets and some tin billies, besides axes and tomahawks, which have been carried away from Lilianfield. One demon-like old woman wears a small shawl tied round her loins, which John recognises as having belonged to the overseer's wife. Their own dilly-bags have no-

thing of value or interest in them. Some locks of hair rolled up in thin slips of bark, probably belonging to a deceased friend; a piece or two of crystal for magic purposes; two or three bones and some fat, which the troopers, who, from their own upbringing, are authorities on such things, pronounce human; a primitive-looking bone fish-hook or two, and some string, made of opossums' hair,—that is all.

Shouts of laughter are now heard from the rocks on the opposite side of the river, and John and Blake make their way over to discover the cause. Now and then there is an interval of silence, which is immediately followed by an uncontrollable scream of hearty laughter from several voices.

Just before John and his friend reach the spot, two shots are fired in rapid succession, and on joining the police they find them standing round the body of a native.

"What are you laughing at, Howard?" demands his officer.

"Oh, Mahmy! we find this one wild fellow lyin' down gammonin' dead. I know that one not dead. I no see hole belongin' to bullet; and Jack and Turkey here" (pointing to two other troopers), "been take a long piece grass, and tickle that one along a inside noss, and then dead black fellow been 'tsee, tsee'" (imitating sneezing), "and me an' altogether cawbawn

laff. By-and-by that fellow get up an' want to run away, an' me been chewt him."

Blake turned away, muttering, "It's no use saying anything to them, they wouldn't understand it." A search resulted in the discovery of eight dead bodies. Some more had probably been wounded, and had escaped.

The slain aboriginals lay in various attitudes. Here was one stretched on his back, his spears in one hand, and his stone tomahawk in the other, the small pupil yet gleaming from amid the yellow whiteness of the half-closed glassy eye—the little hole in his dusky bosom indicating the road which his wild spirit had taken on leaving its earthly habitation. There another on his face, hands and legs spread out; a third had rolled to the bottom of a ravine, where, still clutching his tomahawk, he retained a diabolically hideous and truculent expression of countenance.

All articles of any value were by Blake's orders collected.

A large fire having been lighted, the spoils of the camp were by its means destroyed: spears were broken, and stone tomahawks gathered and carried away, to be thrown into the deepest pool of the river. These arrangements having been carried out, the party returned to where their horses had been turned out, and camped for the night.

With dawn, all hands were once more astir, and again the inexorable sub-inspector continued his chase, and by dint of persevering tracking, and much climbing, he succeeded in discovering and again surprising the encampment, which had been shifted much farther back, in a wild and almost inaccessible part of the mountain-range,—explaining to John the great necessity there was for convincing the natives that it was possible to follow and harass them in their most formidable strongholds.

In rushing this camp one of the boys was wounded by a spear, which, penetrating the thick part of the leg, nearly cut the main artery; another received a large gash on the thigh from a boomerang; and John himself narrowly escaped death at the hands of a big black fellow, who was shot by Blake. Blucher behaved with much pluck, and earned great praise for coolness from his companions. Once more the camp was sacked, and the spoil destroyed; and mounting their horses, the avenging band began their homeward march, and next evening, about sundown, came in sight of Lilianfield. As soon as the buildings were observed, the corporal rode up to Blake, saying, "Please, sir, boy want to sing out."

"Very well, Howard, they may do so," answered the former.

Presently arose in concert a tremulous cry, gradually

increasing in intensity, and winding up with fierce whoops. It had a horrible blood-curdling effect, and the black horsemen kept it up until their arrival—such being the customary anouncement made by them and their fellows of having returned covered with the blood of the slain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DEPARTURE OF THE STONES—STRUGGLES—LOVE IN THE BUSH.

In a short time things resumed their wonted appearance, and the excitement consequent on the attack by the aboriginals had passed away. John felt himself quite happy in his new home, and looked forward with certainty to making a competence. The only thing which troubled him was, that he had never received an answer to his last letter from Ruth. He seemed fated to be kept in a state of uneasiness about her, and although he made strenuous exertions through Fitzgerald, he could not even discover her whereabouts. Stone had never ceased to keep his station in the market, and at last his perseverance had procured for him a purchaser. The new owner of Lilianfield came from Riverina in New South Wales, and his eye was at once taken with the glorious extent of downs and plains, country the value of which he knew by experience, and he cheerfully paid the somewhat long price demanded by Stone. The latter made his way down to

Betyammo, where, leaving Bessie and her infant, he set out to look about him for a new investment.

John felt their departure to be a severe blow, their kindness had endeared them to him, and indeed had they been of his own blood he could not have loved them better. His attention, however, was much taken up with his own affairs, for about this time old Mr Fitzgerald, who was chief owner, formed the idea of transforming the run into a sheep-station. In vain he wrote to dissuade the old gentleman, in vain he begged his friend to exert his influence with his father. The old squatter, never very easy to persuade at any time, remained inflexible; and even young Fitzgerald answered, that although he himself preferred cattle, he thought that more money could be made of sheep, and strongly advised John to follow the advice of his father, whose great experience had ever shown him the safest and shortest road to success.

For some time our hero hesitated as to his course of action, but at last, partly out of deference to his partners' opinions, and partly from a desire to remain connected with them, he reluctantly consented to the change. Nothing could have been more distasteful to himself personally, for cattle were his hobby, and he would willingly have been contented with a very much less profit than his friends looked forward to, in order to have retained them.

The weary day came at last. John had had yards built, and huts erected in carefully selected positions on the run, and soon the baaing clamour arose amid clouds of dust, as the overlanders arrived with their fleecy charge. Good-bye now to the shady cattle-camps, and the quick thunder of the hoofs on the short green-sward, as the eager stock-horse rounded-up the panting mob. The cattle were mustered and sold, and John viewed their departure with a full heart.

Once more came days of lost sheep, of anxious care, and uncertainty. Once more came long midnight rides and thunderstorms, the carrying out of rations, bad lambings, and harassing shearings. Once more he was dependent upon the supply of labour, and he had to fly about humouring the discontented, praising the lukewarm, arguing with some, and taking the law into his own hands with others, the recipient of all complaints, and the bearer of every one's burden.

If success had depended solely upon his own individual exertions or knowledge, he would not have been without his share of it; but alas! such was not the case. The fact was, as he himself suspected, the country upon which the hardy-natured cattle throve, was not suited to the delicate merino, and consequently his was a constant strife against nature. On the other hand, it was most trying to remark how the flocks increased and fattened on the luxuriant pasturages of

Lilianfield, which station was under the management of an inexperienced youth, a relation of its owner. It was aggravating in the extreme to have on occasions to listen to the self-adulatory remarks of this conceited youngster (in point of management or knowledge little better than a cipher), who took to himself the credit due to the rich grasses of the station, which, with all his folly and ignorance, he could not ruin.

For the first year things went pretty well considering: although but few lambs were weaned, yet John hoped to be able, before another year passed by, to induce his partners either to sell the run or the sheep, and return to his favourite pursuit of cattle-breeding. This hope might also have been realised had colonial matters continued in their former state; for a visit paid to the new station by the younger Fitzgerald, had brought him entirely round to John's way of thinking, and on leaving, he promised to urge his father to carry out John's wishes.

Sheep-farming, however, had a dark time ahead of it. For some time past wool-growers had been made uneasy by the constantly falling prices of the English and foreign wool markets, and truly did the lowering pulse indicate the sickness and depression gradually stealing over the whole country. Lower and yet lower sank the quotations, until nearly all sheep-owners were reduced to the very verge of despair. Three parts of the squatters were men who had been

encouraged by the former high value of wool, and the apparently steady demand which existed for it, to hazard their all in acquiring sheep and country. Scarcely had a station been discovered and stocked, when the unlooked-for heavy expenses connected with it, compelled its unhappy owner to seek aid from the hands of the Sydney bankers and commission agents. A mortgage on the run immediately followed, and interest at ten per cent was soon brought up—by commission upon goods supplied, wool-brokerage, compound interest, and the hundred other charges and devices so well understood by the human ghouls who fatten upon the decay of their fellow-creatures—to seventeen per cent, or in some cases considerably more.

The sheep had been bought at high figures, the fall in wool had of course reduced their price, in many cases to one-sixth of their original value, and in others even more. Wages were also high in the outlying districts settled by the pioneers, who, for many reasons, were the heaviest sufferers by the crisis.

John West suffered with the rest. The younger Fitzgerald had indeed succeeded in gaining his father over to the views held by himself and John, but it was then too late to sell, except at such a sacrifice as even all were unwilling to make, and John consented to hold on if possible, and await better times.

His future seemed at this period one of peculiar darkness, but he struggled along, urged by the desperate hope which enables some men to cling tenaciously to the faintest chance of recovery. But his case was even worse than those of many around him. His sheep did not thrive, things were daily growing worse and worse, and sheep were a drug in the market.

He struggled on bravely. What a life it was! After the wet season the long grass sprang up, and quickly seeding, caused his sheep to resemble pincushions. It was impossible to grasp a handful of the wool owing to the millions of tiny needle-like seeds with which it abounded. Nay, the very mutton itself was full of them, and it ever remained a mystery to West how sheep could exist in the misery which they must have suffered. The inside of every sheepskin appeared black with the sharp needles which had penetrated it. In every portion of the animal's body they were to be found, those penetrating to the heart, of course, occasioning death. The swampy pastures also introduced foot-rot among the flocks, and his spare time was always occupied in cutting and dressing hoofs, the very smell of which made him ill. Other diseases also were not wanting, and his sheep decreased in numbers rapidly. The lambing seemed to be a farce, which custom alone rendered it necessary to undertake. The bleating of a lamb jarred painfully on his ears,

its plaintive cry too surely foreboding the end awaiting it.

He had parted with the cattle about two years, and was in the middle of his sheep struggles, when the mailman one day rode up, bringing him a letter from the younger Fitzgerald. Expecting to find it as usual relating to station affairs, he threw it aside to peruse at leisure, and continued the work he had in hand. That evening, drawing his correspondence towards him with a sigh, he tore open his friend's letter first, and commenced to master its details, much after the fashion of a boy learning his lesson. But his stolidity passed away; he gradually became excited; and eventually, passion overcoming his accustomed composed and self-reliant manner, he started up, dashed the letter to the ground, and stamping on it furiously, he stormed up and down the room, raving out incoherent threats and wild upbraidings.

What was the cause of his emotion? Simply this: The letter from his friend contained the announcement that Mr Cosgrove had returned to Cambaranga, and that, in the person of his step-daughter, Fitzgerald had discovered Miss Bouverie, the lady to whom he had lost his heart in Sydney, and whom he was now determined, if possible, to make his wife.

To account for John West's surprise, we must now

give a brief summary of events at Cambaranga and Betyamnio during the years that he had been struggling in the new country.

The old house was again occupied, and had assumed a look of cheerfulness which it had not worn for many a day. Cosgrove himself took little interest in anything. He had changed greatly within the last two years. His figure had lost its elasticity, and his voice was no longer cheery and loud; while his hair had grown grey—almost white. His son's frightful crime had, with the discovery of his other misdemeanours, given him a shock from which he never recovered. Soon after Ralf's flight he had left Cambaranga for Melbourne, where he was joined by Ruth. She had been staying during his visit to Cambaranga with Mr and Mrs Berkeley, relatives of her mother and her own, who gladly would have kept her altogether, for they were childless, and both were proud of their young kinswoman's beauty and accomplishments.

When the details of the murder first became known, Mr Berkeley instantly made preparations for leaving Sydney for some time, to escape the disagreeable scandal to which his relationship with the reputed sister of the murderer might give birth.

Ruth was happy with her friends, and grew to love them much; but when she saw Cosgrove haggard and miserable, cursing the fate which had left him a child-

less man, she could not bear to desert him,—he had always been good to her,—and she determined (to her friends' great indignation) to make her home with her step-father. He now began to value her companionship. He did not talk to her much, but he took pleasure in being near her, and would remain for hours wrapped in thought while she sat at her work or her studies.

Cambaranga was being managed by a superintendent, and Cosgrove and his daughter were consequently free to roam where they liked. Part of their time was spent in Tasmania and part in New Zealand, for Mr Cosgrove had given up all intentions, if he ever had any, of returning to England; and although he never spoke on the subject to Ruth, it seemed to her as if he wanted to be near his son, should his aid ever be required. The fall in wool had compelled him, with many others, to return and look after his business himself, and he found that owing to the incompetence of his manager he had suffered severely in his means.

In fact, it was a toss-up whether or not he could weather through the storm. His mind, formerly so clear, had become clouded and hazy, and the difficulties out of which at one time he would have threaded his way with ease, threatened to overwhelm him.

Ruth had not been long at Cambaranga when Phœbe Gray, who felt much for the lonely girl, rode over to make a call, and conceived a strong liking for her. She contrived to excite an equal amount of enthusiasm in the breasts of her father and mother; and notwithstanding the dislike of the former for Mr Cosgrove, she induced him to drive over with her to Cambaranga in order to bring Ruth back on a visit. Her step-father, although demurring at first, yielded eventually to Mr Gray's representations, that so continual a life of solitude would prove injurious to her health; and she returned with them to Betyammo, where her unaffected gentle ways and ladylike manners speedily made her the favourite of all.

Willy Fitzgerald had, since his friend's departure, thought much on what he had said in reference to Phœbe Gray, and during the many opportunities which he had of watching her, he was forced to admit that she was all John had described her to be; but he could not forget the face or conversation of his unknown love, and were it not for his eminently practical nature, he might have been tempted to start on an expedition in search of her. Time, however, had begun to weaken the impression, and of late he had been a more frequent visitor at Betyammo, and had taken much pleasure in the time spent there. His

visits to all were most acceptable, and to none more so than to demure little Phœbe, whose fluttering heart told her the reason why, whenever she heard his manly voice exchanging greetings with her father, or his firm quick step on the verandah. Her fancy for Ruth amused him much, and he was accustomed to tease her about the enthusiasm with which she spoke of her new friend. He himself had not as yet ridden over to Cambaranga, partly from his old detestation of its owner, and partly from a delicacy connected with the dreadful career of his son. He had consequently had no opportunity of seeing Ruth.

It happened one evening that Ruth, who was staying for a few days with her new friends at Betyammo, was standing in the doorway at the back of the picturesque old cottage. She leant slightly against the sidepost of the door, and mused quietly with bent head, as she traced lines on the sandy floor with her little foot. The setting sun was bathing everything in a sea of golden mellow light, and the heavy bunches of grapes glowed under their leafy shade. The calm stillness of evening was unbroken, save for the murmured cooing notes of the squatter pigeons, as they followed each other down to their favourite water, and the happy utterances of the bright-winged little parrots, half-a-dozen of which had nests far down in

the hollow trunk of the gnarled old monarch of the forest, from whose branches the gigantic convolvulus hung in richer and more graceful festoons than ever. Occasionally the lowing of cattle fell faintly upon the ear, and the smell of wild-flowers became perceptible. Ruth was suddenly awakened from her reverie by hearing the peculiar warning cry of Bessie's old pet, the Native Companion, who came dancing along with outspread wings, uttering a startled coo'-oorrrrrooor, coo'oorrrrrooor. On looking up hastily she became aware of the presence of a gentleman who had dismounted from his horse, and who was gazing eagerly upon her with an earnest wondering expression.

"Good God, Miss Bouverie!" he said, "when did you come here?"

For a moment she started. She remembered having seen a face somewhere like the one now before her, but she could not recall where. It was a pleasant but a faint memory, yet she failed to recollect the circumstances. "I came here to-day from Cambaranga," she replied; "but who are you?"

"From Cambaranga!" uttered Fitzgerald—for it was he—still more perplexed, and somewhat piqued at not being recognised. "Is it possible, Miss Bouverie, that you do not remember me at Mrs Berkeley's in Sydney?"

She smiled; she knew him now,—his voice had been recalling him. It was her turn now to be surprised and glad, for she had liked the young man, whose visit had been driven out of her memory by subsequent painful events. One other explanation, which Fitzgerald scarcely needed, unravelled the whole story. Ruth's father's name was Bouverie, and in consequence, the misapprehension had arisen which had mystified him.

The sun of nature was sinking to rest amid its opal and golden glories; but Fitzgerald's sun had appeared, and blazed with a splendour and brilliancy only the more intense for the long night of darkness which had preceded it. While he gazed on Ruth's beautiful animated features as she spoke of her childhood's days, Willy Fitzgerald felt intoxicated with love. The dark shaded eyes glistened with a moisture which deepened their soft earnestness, and the innocent childlike lips trembled as they returned the thanks of the maiden for service rendered to the child.

Phœbe coming out of the house at this moment, curious to know what could have loosened the strings of Ruth's quiet tongue, took in the situation at a glance, and a bitter pang filled her straightforward honest heart. She little guessed how deeply Ruth's memory had been graven on Fitzgerald's heart;

but she had heard John West, a day or two before his departure, make a laughing allusion to some Sydney lady, whose beauty had exercised a magic influence over him, and she had ever since cherished a secret desire to know more of her. She knew now. Unconsciously she began to hate her friend. A tearing, burning, horrible feeling took possession of her breast, which was not lessened when the squatter, after greeting her kindly, turned once more to Ruth with an evident admiration which betrayed too truly how he hung upon every word her lips uttered. Poor Phœbe struggled hard to suppress the anger which had taken possession of her.

During the evening meal, instances of blind adoration were multiplied before Phœbe's understanding eyes, and what appeared to her father and mother as only natural interest in a pretty girl, bore a very different significance to her. She passed a miserable evening, and when she retired to her room she struggled for hours in prayer against the horrible feelings which she was amazed to find deep-rooted in her breast. She slept but little that night, and awoke next morning to endure a fresh series of mortifications and unintentional slights, which lacerated her wounded spirit. And yet in honesty she could not charge Ruth with behaviour unbecoming her self-respect. She made no advances

unworthy of maidenly modesty, and adopted none of the little artifices or tactics calculated to excite a lover's admiration. Her manner, after the first moments of surprise had passed away, returned to its accustomed quiet and repose. Unconscious of the admiration she excited she could not have been; but whether it was that she was accustomed to the effects of her own beauty, or that she valued not the conquest she had made, Ruth sought not to improve her triumph. Phœbe observed all this, and still found it a hard matter not to detest one whose very indifference was prized by the man she herself best loved in the world.

Phœbe herself seemed to have faded out of Fitzgerald's memory, for during the two days that he spent at Betyammo he was seldom absent from Ruth's side. Inspired by her presence, he became brilliant, sometimes even witty; his bearing grew more erect and his gallantry more marked. It was with difficulty that Phœbe restrained herself from allowing the state of her soul to become apparent. These were hours of the acutest agony; but after much fierce wrestling with herself, she subdued the wild torment, and schooled herself to bear her lot in silence at least. It was, however, unavailing. Ruth soon discovered a difference in her, and for some little time was at a loss to guess its cause. Phœbe's eyes occasionally

bore traces of weeping, and the calm, well-regulated mind betrayed signs of an unaccustomed agitation.

A few evenings after the owner of Ungahrun left Betyammo, the Gray family had separated to retire for the night, and Ruth, who had sought her own room, felt impelled to seek out Phœbe, and if possible discover the cause of her unhappiness. Entering the little bright chamber, so neat and trim, and suggestive of maidenly purity, she saw Phœbe kneeling by the side of the white-curtained bed, her head buried in her hands. Her knock had not been heard, and she could plainly distinguish the sobs of the kneeling girl, as she poured out supplications for aid and guidance.

Ruth's first impulse was to return as quickly as she had advanced; but yielding to second thoughts, she moved forward, and, sinking beside her friend, she stole her arm around her waist silently, offering up her own requests for the direction and assistance of the suppliant. Together they knelt for some time in silence; then rising, Ruth led the agitated girl to a seat, and sitting down beside her, commenced, without exactly knowing why, to tell the story of her own griefs and sorrows. She became aware, as the history advanced, of an increased interest on the part of Phœbe when she spoke of John's kindness and the affection she had entertained for him, and intuitively

she began to suspect the origin of her friend's distress. Delicately she enlarged upon her own feelings, and gave utterance to hopes and thoughts which till then had never shaped themselves in words; and she felt, as Phœbe drew closer to her, and laid her sobbing head trustfully upon her shoulder, that she had been enabled to administer a degree of consolation which acted in some measure as a healing balm to the stricken girl.

After this evening they became firmer friends than ever, but a tacit understanding forbore further approach to the delicate topic. Fitzgerald was a constant visitor, but his devotion awakened no response in Ruth's breast. She endeavoured to time her visits to Betyammo when business was most likely to keep her adorer at home; so that, if possible, Phœbe should be spared the sight of what could not be otherwise than painful to her.

Fitzgerald himself was at a loss to account for Ruth's behaviour. He knew that she was intelligent, and gifted beyond the average, but her brightest moods were reserved for others; and exert himself to please her as he might, he was unable to obtain the smallest encouragement. Indeed he could not help suspecting sometimes a desire on her part to avoid his notice; but he had been so general a favourite, and so much sought after, that he never for a moment contemplated rejection.

Stone's search for a home had terminated in the purchase of a very fine freehold property of over seven thousand acres in extent, about one hundred miles distant from Brisbane, and contiguous to a growing country town. He and Bessie established themselves here, surrounded by pleasant neighbours; and the ex-pioneer devoted his time to the fattening of store cattle purchased from stations at some distance up-country, combined with the formation of a pure-bred herd of shorthorn cattle,—in which pursuit he took much interest, and which promised him a most profitable return on the money invested in it.

A visit from Bessie assisted greatly in keeping matters straight, and a few whispered words of encouragement in Ruth's ear were a sufficient reward for her self-control. The latter had feared lest the stigma attached to the crime committed by her stepfather's son might have included her within its withering shade, and she felt that, without further evil, enough had befallen John through his connection with Mr Cosgrove. On this account she had refrained from answering his last letter, which, notwithstanding, she prized as one of her greatest treasures; and it pained her to think that he might ascribe to disinclination and ingratitude a reticence which resulted from a desire for his welfare. But John West had no such ideas; and at the moment when

Fitzgerald's letter had roused all the latent passion within him, he loved her with an intensity which surprised himself. It was a strange, faithful love—imaginative indeed, but not the less pure and sincere. Seeing few of the opposite sex, his mind ever reverted to the one bright type of it which had captivated his boyish fancy. The realising of his dreams one day was his greatest incentive to struggle through his hard life. Lying down or rising up, his most secret and cherished thoughts were of Ruth. It was therefore he rejoiced in his early successes; they brought him nearer to her: on her account he fretted over his disasters; they removed from him his hope.

Days elapsed after the receipt of the news which had affected his peace of mind so violently, before he recovered any degree of serenity. In vain he argued with himself; in vain he compared his prospects with those of his more fortunate friend. The latter was everything she could desire. What had he himself to offer? Even supposing that her love still remained his—and he laughed bitterly as the thought struck him—what would he do with her? He had no home to offer; and were he indeed to obtain a situation as manager of a station (a very remote contingency at this time, when the ruin of hundreds filled each journal with advertisements from well-known and capable men, clamorous for employment), what kind of home

would it be to her, brought up in luxury and accustomed to refinement? How could she, tender and inexperienced, encounter the coarse everyday realities of hard practical life, which were the portion of an underpaid and overworked superintendent's wife? He might at any moment be thrown out of his situation at the caprice of some arrogant, self-made, vulgar rich man; and Ruth's delicate susceptibilities might be shocked at having perforce to mingle with coarser and baser natures. No; it was all a folly. He was mad to think of her at all. He was worse than mad to feel as he did towards the friend who had shown him kindness of the most disinterested kind. What a dog in the manger would he be to stand between her and that comfort which goes so great a way in promoting the happiness of married life!

With these feelings he turned once more desperately to work, and strove, by the violence of his exertions, to blunt the sharpness of his reflections; but little satisfaction could be derived from the contest in which he was engaged. It seemed as if the very forces of nature were arrayed against him; for the season proved one of the driest which it had been his fate to witness. A scorching heat withered up all green-feed, bringing numberless miseries in its train. The wretched condition of the sheep betrayed their unhappy state, and their fast-decreasing numbers were

only too sure an index of the utter unfitness of the country on which they depastured. Scarcely three-fourths remained of the original number which had been delivered to John. Vast bush-fires sprang up in all directions, devouring the dry tinder-like grass, and filling the air with a smoky haze. The water-holes dried one by one. In some there remained a small quantity of thick, green, watery slime, encircled by tenacious fathomless mud, out of which the weakened limbs of the animals, who were attracted by the smell of the precious liquid, failed to draw their water-swollen bodies; and around most of these water-traps (for they were nothing else) lay embedded helplessly a ring of slowly perishing, despairing-eyed creatures, famishing with hunger and dying with thirst under a blazing sun.

Sheep were lost daily, and wandered about at their will, all the efforts of the worn-out shepherds failing to keep them together; and indeed, in most instances, it was as a great personal favour to John himself that the men remained with him during the fearful drought. Lean, disease-stricken native dogs dragged their mangy bodies along beside gaunt tottering kangaroos, without strength or courage to assail them; and dead wallabies and other animals lay about everywhere.

What misery it was! Exertions were fruitless to

alleviate suffering or prevent loss, and John felt his heart hardening; his soul began to rebel, and bitterness to flow from that inward fount from which had welled a spring of love to all.

He had returned to his hut after an unusually fatiguing day of useless labour. He ate his lonely meal of salt junk and damper, and lighting his pipe, he paced up and down in front of his solitary abode. It was one of those beautiful moonlit nights, which were without beauty to the owners of the parched, waterless pieces of territory, on which they could behold their stocks dying without being able to assist them in the slightest. The heaven was without a single cloud. The sweet influences of Pleiades had no power to modify the sufferings on earth, and the red Aldebaran looked pitilessly with an eye of fire upon a fiery world. All around, the horizon glared with the reflected glow of huge conflagrations. As he strode up and down in his bitterness of soul, he realised more acutely the great weight of the burden which bowed him down. Descending from the branches of an iron-bark tree beside him, a beautiful little mangaroo [1] floated downwards on outstretched wings to the foot of a tall sapling at a little distance away, and nimbly as-

[1] A description of the small flying squirrel, with exquisitely fine fur.

cending it, was followed by his mate, who, quickly imitating the example set her, perched herself on a branch adjoining. There they chattered and played, frolicking among the branches, through which the white moon shone with cold hard loveliness. As John watched their merry gambols, some sympathetic chord of his nature was touched. How gladsome and joyous they looked! They were content with their humble lot. Some degree of their happiness radiated into his own heart, and he "blessed them unawares." A feeling of hope sprang up in his soul, and his fast-waning faith and trust in the good providence of God struck a deeper root and found a richer soil. He went about his cheerless work with a renewed strength; and shortly afterwards, to his great joy, a change in the weather brought with it a cessation from his hardest toil.

Not very long after the drought had passed away, John received a letter from young Fitzgerald, enclosing one from his father, which intimated that arrangements had been made for selling the run for what it would bring by auction. The letter went on to state that, as the speculation had proved disastrous to all concerned, and as John had lost the capital which he had invested in it, he was authorised to draw the sum of £300 as some compensation for the exertions he had made when in charge.

The younger Fitzgerald's letter merely congratulated his friend on having ended his slavery, and, apparently taking it for granted that he would make his way straight to Ungahrun, concluded by saying that they would there talk over his future plans. These Fitzgerald had already arranged in his own mind. John was to manage Ungahrun at a liberal salary, which would be some indemnification for what he had already gone through; while he himself would marry Ruth, and with her visit the much-talked-of Europe.

The sale was concluded; John had given delivery; and he and his faithful Blucher, now almost out of his senses with joy at the thought of returning to his tribe, were on their way down to Ungahrun. The undertaking of the journey had been a subject of much inward conflict with John. He told himself how much better it would be to keep away, and never look upon Ruth again; but with curious inconsistency he brought forward stronger arguments, which proved how ungrateful he would appear to his other friends should he not return amongst them, if only for a short visit; and at last he started with an uneasy conscience.

Many a well-known spot he remembered as he travelled along. Here he had camped with his cattle during the rain. Into these lagoons they rushed when parched with thirst. This is the identical gully into

which he and his horse fell headlong during the stampede of his cattle. Now he is on the Cambaranga run. He is strong still in his resolution to keep from temptation, but one look at the homestead and the house she lives in he must have, if it costs him his life.

They come to a spot where a short cut strikes off for Ungahrun, and sending Blucher with the pack-horses along it, John keeps towards his own early home. He experiences somewhat of the feeling which may torture a condemned spirit roaming in the vicinity of Paradise.

As he rides through the thick wattles which line the road, he meets a man with a pack-horse. It is the station ration-carrier. John has too often performed the same work not to know his appearance. A few hasty questions are answered in a manner which relieve and yet disappoint him. Mr Cosgrove is at home, but his daughter is not. She is staying at Betyammo, and the man does not know when she will return.

John rides on with less interest and a slight attack of his old gnawing pain. Fitzgerald is doubtless at Betyammo. Now he is in view of the well-known head-station. There is the well-remembered woolshed. It seems only yesterday since he and Stone visited it for the first time. There lies the garden, and the little creek which joins its waters with the

main stream. Can so many years have flown by since his eyes first rested on the scene? Yonder is Ruth's mother's grave,—she must often go there. He will for once kneel where she has knelt, and then he will depart. He will risk his peace of mind no further. Quietly he crosses over to the spot which his memory inseparably connects with her he loves. It is much the same as when he left it. The railing and headstone which John had put up about her mother's grave are still there, but there is a look of trim neatness about it which shows that loving hands have been lately at work. How rapidly his heart is beating! His boyhood's memories flow over him. He remembers how fervently his own father strove to ward from him the ills of life, and as he kneels under the great currajong-tree his mind becomes absorbed in the past.

. . . . . .

Fitzgerald had in vain sought an opportunity to converse with Ruth in private, for with an amount of clever tact and skilful manœuvring which astonished herself, she had hitherto managed to evade and put off the scene which she felt was inevitable. She liked the Ungahrun squatter much as a friend, and the thought of the pain which she knew was in store for him distressed her greatly. Day by day she felt that the approach of the dreaded hour was drawing

nearer, and that the crisis was alone postponed by herself.

She had one day taken advantage of a rumoured absence of Fitzgerald from home to canter over and visit her Betyammo friends, when to her surprise she found her lover there before her. He had turned up in some unaccountable way, as he often did about that time. Strange coincidences seemed to multiply themselves in connection with him. This time, his face wore a look of resolution, and his general air gave so much evidence of determination, that Ruth trembled. She felt sure the time for an explanation had come. Still she struggled to delay it. Insisting that her step-father could not spare her, she announced her intention next morning of returning to Cambaranga; and waylaying Mr Gray privately, she begged that he would accompany her back. It was, however, no use. Fitzgerald saddled his horse, deaf to all hints, and joined the party. Ruth resolutely kept by Mr Gray's bridle-rein most of the way, and it was not until within a short distance from the station that the casual encounter of an intimate and loquacious friend of the old squatter's gave Fitzgerald the opportunity he sought for. In a few straightforward and manly words he said all he had to say; and earnestly he made offer of his love, and promised to shield and guard her, as his heart's most sacred treasure, through

life. His utterance had been so rapid that Ruth, whose tears fell fast, was quite unable to stem its torrent. She shook her head, and was endeavouring to decline the offer as gently as she could, when the loud greeting whinny of a horse startled them both. It stood tied up to a sapling near her mother's grave, and the sound had the effect of causing its owner to rise hastily from where he had been kneeling and gaze in their direction.

He stood bareheaded—a tall, muscular, well-built figure, in rough bush attire, his auburn beard and hair powdered with the dust of travel, gazing at them with a frightened stare on his bronzed aquiline features.

"John West!" cried Fitzgerald, in delighted surprise.

Darkly red flushed the weather-beaten face, a tempest of rage for an instant seemed to pass over the strongly marked countenance, but only for a moment. The next minute he had sprung on his horse and was galloping away, excitedly waving his hands. Whither? —he knew and cared not.

Ruth's tears had stopped with the surprise, but now they welled faster than ever; and Fitzgerald's surprise at his friend's strange conduct but increased their flow. Attributing her emotion to the same cause which had first occasioned it, Fitzgerald would have renewed his suit, but was excitedly, almost passionately, interrupted by Ruth, who incoherently begged him to

desist; and on reaching the head-station she hurried to her chamber, in which she shut herself up, resolutely refusing to see any one, not excepting her step-father and old Mr Gray, who feared that she had been attacked by a sudden indisposition.

Fitzgerald wandered about in a maze of astonishment, at one time canvassing his friend's behaviour, and next moment that of his mistress.

Night, however, brought counsel, and in the morning Ruth met him with a calm face; and while stating her appreciation of the proposal he had made to her, and her own deep sense of his private worth, firmly declined accepting it, causing that gentleman's visage to assume an expression of more puzzled amazement than it had ever worn before. In vain he would have expostulated. Mildly, but decidedly, she put an end to further entreaties by informing him that to her the subject was of so painful a nature that its further discussion could only wound without changing her feelings.

In desperation Fitzgerald applied for advice, first to Mr Gray, and then to Mr Cosgrove, the latter appeal to him a most distasteful proceeding.

Both shrugged their shoulders helplessly, and Fitzgerald rode home by himself that afternoon, a very much sadder man than when he left it, vainly seeking some explanation of so bewildering a state of things.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OLD FRIEND—TO THE DIGGINGS.

INSTINCTIVELY the old Ungahrun horse bore his rider along the road towards his home, and several miles were travelled at the rapid pace they had started at, before John West's mind returned to its former balance. His travel-worn nag, however, giving signs of fatigue, induced him to draw the rein, and proceed at a more rational pace. A whirlwind of various emotions had swept over him within the last half-hour, and revealed to him the true state of his feelings. Peace of mind was only to be obtained by flight. He dared not stay. He could not bear it. Philosophy was nowhere. As he rode along, he overtook a young man on horseback driving a couple of pack-horses before him, in company with Blucher. He had no wish for conversation, and calling to the latter, was about to pass with a quiet good-day, when the blackboy, who, having partaken of

the stranger's mid-day meal, had all at once become on very intimate terms with him, remarked,—

"This one white fellow been know you along o' Ingland, Missa West."

John looked at the stranger, but failed to recognise him.

"It is so long ago," said the traveller, "that I don't wonder at your forgetting me; and indeed, but for your blackboy, I would not have known you. I am Ned, the boy that was in Mr Cosgrove's service, whom you protected from that bully Cane, the stable lad." John's thoughts flew back to England, and he remembered a lad, whom he had often saved at his personal peril from the rough bullying of Bill Cane, and who, on his departure, had presented him with his faithful Spot,—the poor dog whose death by snake-bite has already been related. "I have been round here two or three times to ask for you, sir, since I came to Australia, which I did about five years ago, for I kept thinking of you, and wishing I could meet you, but you always happened to be absent when I passed."

West felt much gratified that the boy's love should have remained so true, and kindly shaking hands with him, inquired his history.

It turned out that, from the time of young West's departure, one thought had taken possession of Ned,

and that was to go out to the country where his protector resided, and if possible join him there. An opportunity as a stable-boy in charge of some stud cattle on board a ship had offered, and Ned had jumped at the chance. A year or two had been spent in station work, but a gold-field having broken out, the lad had forsaken steady employment to become a "wandering digger."

Two or three attempts he had made, when travelling across the country from one rush to another, to find his patron, but hitherto he had been unsuccessful, and at present he was on his way forth to try his luck at a fresh field, the report of which had lately reached him in a letter from one of his former digging mates.

He had been doing very well on the field which he had just left, his claim was turning him in about an ounce and a half of gold a-week, but the "yellow fever" proved too strong for him, as it did for most diggers. The news of the distant rush left him no peace. With the digging community green fields are always at a distance, and the further away the greener. He felt constrained to go, so selling his claim for what it would bring, he started for the hitherto but little known regions in which the "new rush" was situated.

John had been tempted more than once to visit a gold-field, and seek his fortune in the bowels of the

earth, but had hitherto refrained, from the feeling that such a life, once begun, would be difficult to relinquish. He knew that men slaved away all their lives in seeking for the big prize which never turned up, and in following the Will-o'-the-wisp light which induces them to forsake settled homes, and comforts, for the phantom of independence. He had often been warned that a digger's life once commenced left a man unsettled ever after. He knew that for one lucky individual there were three or four hundred unsuccessful ones, and that the gold extracted from the earth is acquired only at the expense of an equivalent, and often much larger sum, brought on to the field, by those who seek for it, and who lose their little all in doing so. He was acquainted with all this, but in his present desperate condition he reasoned not. He had no ties to keep him back. No one would grieve, should he disappear among the crowd of miners whose ranks were being swelled day by day by individuals such as himself. He had some money. He had found an experienced and faithful work-fellow. He would try digging. He could not be more unsuccessful at it than he had already been.

He camped with his newly found companion, and after a sleepless night, spent in debating with himself on the wisdom of the step he meditated taking, he

astonished Ned with the information, that he had decided to go to the rush, and offered to join him as a mate.

Ned, to tell the truth, was so taken aback by the suddenness of the intimation, that at first he almost doubted whether his old friend and protector was in possession of his senses; but on finding nothing he had to say could shake the resolution which the other had formed, he expressed his satisfaction, and eagerly welcomed him as a companion.

He was aware that his diggings' experience had put him in a position in which he could be of much use to his new mate, and he longed to make a return for the kindness shown to him in former days, the memory of which continually called forth his gratitude.

Blucher was sent home with a short note for Fitzgerald, announcing that circumstances had arisen to prevent John's return to Ungahrun, for some time at least, and the two diggers struck aside into a road leading northwards towards the "New Rush."

The change of life and the fresh hopes by which he was animated, helped our hero greatly in overcoming the troubled state of his mind. His failing courage revived, and newer and grander castles in the air built themselves up, step by step, as he approached the El Dorado of his hope. Somehow he felt as if he really was to be a lucky one. Others might fail; he met

hundreds who had been digging all their lives, and who had not yet found the big nugget which they had never ceased looking for since first they began their wearisome labour, nevertheless it did not come home to him. He felt that it would be different with him. Confidence once more steeled his nerves, and glorious hope pointed onward to renewed struggle and victory. Ned had treated him with much respect from the beginning, and would have constituted himself a kind of body-servant, but that John firmly resisted such deference, and stipulated that their conduct to each other was to be based on terms of brotherly equality,—terms which Ned found it very hard to observe, but which John was inexorable in maintaining. Indeed, as they journeyed along, their mutual liking increased with the necessity for little kindnesses and attentions, and Ned's enthusiasm would have led him almost to death's door to serve his mate and friend, who never spared himself in any wise.

Fresh horses and pack-saddles had been bought; rations, picks, shovels, and tin dishes purchased; and they made their way very comfortably among the crowds steering along the roads, all bound for the new diggings. Outfits of all sorts, and of the strangest kinds, could be seen in the motley throng. Here a party of footmen tramped along with their swags rolled

up on their backs, and their tin-billies in their hands. There half-a dozen followed in the rear of an old horse, bearing the united packs and rations of the party. Now and then a tilted cart, drawn by three or four horses, would be overtaken, containing the owner's family and effects, and followed by a few gaunt-looking kangaroo dogs. Sometimes they passed a drove of fat cattle or a few laden teams, all making their way towards the common focus. Occasionally well-mounted and equipped diggers, with plenty of spare horses, pushed rapidly along; and now and again a helpless-looking creature, without blankets or food, and evidently depending upon what he could beg or borrow, was left behind by them. Once or twice they came upon a couple of stalwart navvies, carrying their possessions on a hand-barrow between them, and on one occasion they passed an eccentric individual, wheeling his worldly goods in a barrow, his nether man enveloped for the sake of coolness and ease in a woman's petticoat. All carried firearms of one sort or another, from the ancient Queen Anne musket and flintlock pistol to the latest invention in breechloading and repeating rifles and revolvers, and every one seemed animated by the desire to reach the new field as soon as possible.

Each night the neighbourhood of the water camped at assumed the appearance of a little canvas village,

which disappeared like magic with the morning's light. Daily, return diggers were met who, after having overcome every obstacle and travelled the weary journey, became disgusted with the unfamiliar outward look of the country as soon as they arrived, and turned their backs on it, without ever having put pick in the ground or washed a dish of dirt, convinced that, because the features of the land were unknown to them, it was impossible that gold could exist. The unfavourable reports of these turnbacks were, however, little heeded by the still onward pressing stream, who possessed more or less reliable sources of information in the shape of private letters from trusted and experienced mates, or relations and friends,—for diggers keep up a constant communication with each other.

After about a month's steady travelling, they arrived at the outskirts of the chief township of the diggings to which they were bound. For a few miles before the travellers caught sight of the buildings, trees denuded of their bark for roofing purposes had warned them of their proximity to the main camp. Innumerable horse-bells tinkled everywhere, and here and there little white tents marked the temporary habitations of men whose business had led them to the township.

Descending a cleared ridge, dotted all over with the

stumps of trees whose trunks and branches had been used for firewood, the two mates came in sight of a miserable, dilapidated-looking village, composed of one wide street, full of tree stumps, enclosed between two rows of ricketty, patched, tumble-down dwellings. The "humpies," for houses they cannot be called, are of all shapes of architecture, and are formed of the materials which come readiest to hand. The great object seems to be the securing of a dry roof overhead. Most of them have their walls formed of saplings, and are covered in with bark. Many there are, however, roofed with calico. Some, indeed, are composed of calico altogether, and one or two of the more pretentious are protected overhead with sheets of zinc, which has done duty on half the goldfields in the colony. A long strip of white calico on most of the buildings in the place bears, in black letters, the intimation that the miserable apology for a dwelling to which it is affixed, rejoices in the sounding title of the "Great Australian Hotel," or the "Royal," or "Empire," or some other such name, and that its owner is licensed to sell all kinds of wines and spirits, &c. The rest of the town is made up of "General Stores," a couple of butchers' shops, and a couple of horse-shoeing forges, built in the same style, together with a number of peculiar looking tenements, consisting partly of tilted carts, sheets of bark, calico, &c., the

whole having a tattered, dirty, rabbit-hutch air about them. Many of these are sly grog shanties, doing a thriving trade,—for it is a peculiarity about some men that they rather drink inferior grog at a high price in opposition to the laws of the country, than consume their liquor in comparative safety, in accordance with existing regulations.

The little township is very full of men at present, but only few are to be seen on the so-called "street." All hands are either in the public-houses, stores, &c., or are at work in the neighbourhood. In each of the miserable-looking horse stockyards, at the back of the various hotels, are standing a few saddled and bridled hacks. The tucked-up bellies and sick looks of one or two of them, betray that they have been awaiting thus their owners' pleasure to depart since morning, perhaps all night. The ricketty enclosures which surround the back kitchens and outhouses are one mass of broken bottles and sardine tins, over which run in some instances large pumpkin vines, thriving luxuriantly among the filth and rubbish out of which they have sprung. Now and then a dirty drunken individual, with disordered dress, and uncovered unkempt hair, bleared eyes, and sodden vacant features, staggers about unmeaningly, or stretches himself on the ground. Two or three horses saddled and packed stand hitched up to the posts in

front of the various stores and public-houses. Sitting on a bench outside the principal hotel are three or four hopelessly abandoned loafers, wearing plainly the stamp of "deadhead" on their shameless features, waiting to be asked to drink, or listening eagerly for the not infrequent, "shout for all hands." Inside the bar stands in front of a row of brilliantly labelled and capsuled bottles and gorgeously painted kegs, a rough knowing-looking fellow, exerting himself to the utmost in supplying the wants of a crowd of customers who fill the rude drinking shop. The few spare moments between the different orders for drinks he devotes to giving the already used "nobbler tumblers" a slight rinse, and a hasty wipe with the corner of a much used towel, or in adroitly pretending to undo for the first time the capsule of a bottle of "Martell," or "Hennessey," which in all probability he himself has fastened on a day or two before, after filling the empty bottle with some noxious compound of his own manufacture. He knows every one, and every one knows him by his Christian name. Each time drinks are called for, he is included. He cannot drink "hard stuff," however, always. His business would suffer. He has a private bottle filled with tea, from which he fills his glass after receiving payment. He is the centre of information. He is able to tell every one about their old mates and acquaintances,

how they are doing, where they are working, and when they are likely to be next in the township. Most of the diggers are discussing the merits of the various creeks and gullies where they have been at work. One or two are exhibiting a collection of nuggets and rough gold, which they carry about with them in chamois-leather bags in their trousers pockets. At the other end of the bar, the publican's wife, tricked out in her best, is displaying her charms for the benefit of a horsey-looking sharper, who has earned a doubtful reputation for pluck and fastness. He has already "done" his two years for horse-stealing, and one or two partners in mining speculations and other enterprises curse the hour they came across him. He is sitting on a cask in a corner, his expensive and beautifully-coloured meerschaum in full swing, playing on an accordion, at which accomplishment he is somewhat of a dab. The publican himself is too busy to attend to details. He is constantly on the road between the diggings and the port, getting up supplies, or taking down gold to the bank; he leaves his business at home to the bar-keeper and his wife.

Some day there may come a smash. The business may fail, and the barman may set up a more flourishing trade himself; and the gay wife may disappear into obscurity with the horsey accordion-player. It has happened before. In a little adjoining room, half

filled with casks, some men are playing at cards, and in the doorway two are quarrelling over some bygone grievance. Presently their mutual recriminations end in a fight, and all hands rush outside to see the combatants. Strong muscular fellows, stripped to the waist, slogging away at each other with determined fury, and rolling on the hard ground and tree roots with their tender white skins, as the chances of the fight vary.

Everywhere the same scenes may be observed. Men keep coming, and others departing. Bullock-drays arrive laden, and depart empty. The first place newcomers make for is, in nine cases out of ten, one of the public-houses. A few of the steadier go to the stores. These are also full of men, some preparing for a start out to the workings. Others there are who, having a day or two to spare, prefer the quiet of the stores to the noise of the public-houses; and there are one or two yellow-looking fever patients, who have come to the township to recruit on fresh beef and vegetables after a severe attack of illness. Every kind of article likely to be wanted by a digging population is kept in stock. Picks, shovels, tin dishes, quart-pots, sardines, jams, pickles, potted meats, blankets, bellows, hats, boots, slops, flour, tea, sugar, rice, tobacco, salt, gunpowder, and a hundred other necessaries, are piled up in heaps. Diggers are busy buy-

ing what they want, paying at the counter for their purchases in gold dust, of which each seems to possess a stock more or less. Others are discussing the particulars of various rushes to different parts of the field, or narrating to each other the history of the patch which "Jim the Sailor" dropped on to so unexpectedly, or which "Brandy Bill" struck, with his persistent good luck,—for there seems to be a prevailing feeling that good fortune always attends the most worthless and reckless characters. The two blacksmiths' shops which the little place boasts of are full of horses waiting to be shod. The butchers are busy cutting up into steaks the last pieces of the bullock they have hung up in their shops. There are two rival meat establishments, and they have already disposed of two whole carcases each this morning, in the form of steaks and roasting-pieces, and they are again preparing to slaughter another apiece this evening to supply the demand for beef. In fact, everybody is busy, and the signs of bustle and drunkenness denote that all are doing well, and that gold is plentiful.

Ned and West dismount at the door of one of the largest stores. It is kept by a young fellow who has followed the business of a diggings storekeeper for many years, and whose cautious industry has been rewarded by much patronage and popularity among the miners. It is no easy matter to keep on good

terms with so arbitrary and independent a set of customers; and diggings storekeepers, who, as a rule, are a persevering, straightforward, honest set of men, earn hardly all they make. Ned has known and dealt with the storekeeper on several other fields, and receives the welcome of an old friend. The storekeeper informs them where they may find a good patch of feed for their horses, and insists on their putting up the first night with him in the store. Swags are brought inside, horses are hobbled out, and the travellers have barely time to put things in order, when a great bell is rung at the door of the chief hotel next door, and a crowd of hungry miners make their way into the large apartment used as an eating-room. It is rather a picturesque sight to see so many rough bearded figures, each dragging a gun or rifle about, which he leans against the wall close to him. Nor is the display of firearms a mere show. Only last week a man was speared and killed in returning to his tent from the butcher's shop, where he had gone to buy meat for his supper. A second and third dinner is served before all the ravenous constituents are supplied, and the afternoon is spent sitting on the flour bags in the store, listening to those details of the peculiarity of the goldfield, and the character of the workings, so interesting to all diggers. After supper they stroll through the buildings, and visit one public-

house and store after another. All are full of men drinking and smoking.

This is the "Diggers' Arms." A group of miners are collected at the bar, listening to the singing of a rather good-looking but dissipated and reckless character. He is well known all over the country. He distinguished himself in early life as a brave sailor, since when he has had numberless good chances offered to him, but has ever disgraced himself and his patrons. He trolls out a rollicking sea song, in a street-ballad-singer's voice, for the benefit of the company, in expectation of the "shout" which is sure to follow. In another, the only hotel which boasts of a billiard-table, John recognises with extreme pain, in the bloated face of the billiard-marker, his shipmate "Boyle," who came to the country as "manager of a station." He has sunk low enough now. He taps Ned on the shoulder, and they leave the place together. Nearly all the "humpies" and huddled-up hovels have an open fire burning near them, encircled with pots, buckets, and dishes, for the purpose of cooking. As they pass one of these shanties, from which proceeds the sound of drunken merriment, the noise of uncontrollable laughter from the fire attracts their attention. It is very dark, and standing in the shade they observe the prostrate figure of an intoxicated white man on the ground, among the cooking utensils. In his

maudlin restlessness he turns ever and anon, allowing his nerveless arm to stretch itself so that the fingers fall in the red hot embers, from which he rescues them with a sudden shake, caused by the intense pain, which provokes a burst of amusement each time it is repeated from a delighted blackboy, who is comfortably ensconced in his blankets a little way off enjoying the scene. It is useless to say anything to the boy, so dragging the unhappy man to a safer distance, they pass on.

This is the "Emerald Isle Hotel." They glance in at the door to observe a broth of a boy from County Tipperary squatted on his hams on the floor, in which position he is executing, amid fearful howls and encouraging exclamations, a kind of war dance, which requires no small degree of agility and strength. "Go it, Jerry! Jerry's a terror!" shout the admiring crowd.

"Come along," says Ned, "we've had enough of that."

The next place they enter is a rather quiet public-house, kept by a Chinaman who has acquired the name of selling good liquor. He is patronised by the authorities of the goldfield, when they leave the Government camp and pay a visit to the township. To-night the commissioner of the field and one or two friends sit at the little table in the quiet bar-parlour. There has been a meeting for some purpose, at which he has presided, and he is surrounded by a number of diggers,

who enjoy being in the society of the great man, who is also nothing loth to purchase popularity cheaply. He is telling them a story about his own digging life. Listen! He and some of his mates discovered a good payable creek on a diggings many years ago, and to prevent others following his tracks, and participating in the spoil, he set fire to the grass behind him. (He will give his audience a classical allusion, it will raise him in their estimation.) It puts him in mind of that great general of old, who on invading an enemy's country set fire to his shipping. "Who was it?" he asks himself, tapping his forehead for inspiration. One voice suggests Julius Cæsar, another Cortes. "No," says the scholar reflectively,—"no, it wasn't either of them;" then, as if a ray of light had suddenly fallen upon him, he inquires, "Wasn't it Apollo?"

Returning to the friendly storekeeper's, the two mates are about to turn in, but alas! they woo Morpheus in vain. They are situated between the chief public-house and the abode of a rival storekeeper, who is subjected to periodical fits of intoxication, and he has just entered upon one of these paroxysms. He invariably commences, so their host states, by driving his wife out of doors, and to-night the poor woman is seeking a home where she can. He is particularly distinguished for the marvellous facility with which he can coin strange oaths and wicked expressions, as well as for

the enduring loquacity, which characterises him day and night, without intermission. His conversation and remarks are chiefly addressed to his wife. He is at present sitting with a rifle at the open window, upbraiding her with not having courage enough to come and be shot. Occasionally he relieves his feelings by howling after the manner of a native dog. The noise from the public-house on the other side is almost equally loud, though of a more varied character, and John West vowed that his first night passed in the midst of a digging township should be the last, if he could help it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GOLD QUEST.

THE alluvial ground in the immediate vicinity of the township had been worked out over and over again, and was now haunted only by the few who had neither means nor spirit to enable them to pierce the as yet unexplored regions farther away. It was therefore decided upon by Ned, who had been indefatigable in collecting information from all sources, that he and his comrade should make their way out to the outskirts of the goldfield, and try their luck on some of the latest discovered gold-producing creeks.

There being as yet no other spot at which rations could be procured, they replenished their stock from the friendly storekeeper's supply, and loading all their beasts, including even their own riding horses, to the utmost, they started on foot for the particular creek on which they had resolved to set in to work.

Wild and savage the country looked as they pursued their solitary way along a little path for some

distance from the township, and still wilder and more inhospitable it grew, as, leaving the traces of human existence, they plunged into the rocky mountainous barren forest, in which signs of animal life were rarely met with. Now and then they encountered small parties of miners, rough, bronzed, and ragged-looking, making their way towards what to them, after their silent solitary lives, must have appeared a stirring busy city.

Following the directions given them, in a few days they arrived at the particular creek for which they were bound, a dark uninteresting little valley, through which ran, in a chain of shallow waterholes, a small sandy creek. On a little flat were pitched a few tents, and the banks of the creek were being broken into by a number of stalwart diggers, armed with picks and shovels. Here and there might be seen men sitting at the edge of waterholes, tin dish in hand, swilling the wash-dirt round and round, with the object of allowing the golden particles from their weight to sink to the bottom, and thus get separated from the earthy matter, which was permitted to escape over the side of the dish.

Their tent was soon erected, and a piece of ground selected and pegged out, and daybreak next morning found them hard at work, and hard uncompromising work it was. The banks of the stream had to be cut

away with solid heavy pick-and-shovel labour, until the wash-dirt (lying upon the clayey substratum) containing the gold was reached. This had to be carefully bagged up and conveyed to the water's edge, after which it had to be washed in the manner previously described, and which required no little skill and endurance, the whole day's work very often not producing enough to pay for rations. A succession of weeks of unrewarded labour decided them upon striking their camp and wooing fortune on fresh grounds. Their intention was no sooner known in the little camp, than the deserted spot occupied by their canvas habitation was measured off and appropriated by some fresh arrivals, who at once commenced to sink a hole for luck as they phrased it, on the very site hitherto used by them as a fireplace, and where they had sat together night after night discussing their cheerless prospects. Away they wandered again without having any definite place of residence in view. Sometimes they tried one place, anon another, as fancy led them. In one gully success in a limited degree would keep them working for weeks, in the hope that by dint of persistent work a reward for their labour would ultimately await them. In another and more likely looking spot, utter barrenness seemed to prevail.

John West's hopes had brightened up exceedingly on seeing the evidences of so great a plenty of the

precious metal at the Township, but he forgot that only the lucky ones could afford a visit to that centre of the hard-working community, and that hundreds upon hundreds earned barely enough to keep them going from day to day.

His digging experience was so limited, that he was unable to believe it possible that poverty could exist on a great goldfield. He was unaware that, on the celebrated fields of "Bendigo" and "Ballarat" (where large fortunes were made every day by the turning of a shovel), as much misery and want could be witnessed as in any of the great cities of Europe.

An extract, dated June 8, 1878, taken from the 'Queenslander,'[1] will illustrate the kind of life they led at this period :—

" . . . The country itself and the population peculiarly favour the raids of hostile blacks. Geologists tell us that Northern Queensland was once covered by a dense coating of desert sandstone or conglomerate. On the great watersheds of the Flinders and Cloncurry this overlying mass has been denuded by the currents and atmospheric agencies of bygone ages. Downs which rejoice the heart of the pastoral-tenant, nourish on their monotonous surface fat beeves, where once the wallaby and wallaroo coursed through rocky defiles; but the source of the Gilbert more slowly yields to the same influences, and maintains its primeval character of sterile rock and savage grandeur.

[1] Published weekly in Brisbane, Queensland. An ably-conducted journal, of which the population of the colony are justly proud.

The river itself is a fit prototype of its innumerable branches. A broad bed of sand winds its tortuous course through overhanging cliffs of conglomerate, falling here and there, where the process of disintegration has been more complete, into low rises, covered with pebbly wash, and intersected by veins of the strata underlying the conglomerate, slate, diorite, &c. Sometimes on the banks of the main river, more frequently in the ravines running therein, nearly always at the heads of the tributaries and lesser creeks, wherever the slate has been exposed, and the auriferous strata are uncovered, the colour of gold is found. Under favourable conditions—that is to say, where the denudation has been complete, the process of removal extensive, and the bars of diorite supposed to contain gold-bearing leaders sufficiently pierced, and the slate fully bared—payable deposits of gold are struck, rarely, if ever, bearing any similarity except in the conditions under which they are found. In size, form, and value, the precious metal within a limited area will present great diversities. Sometimes the leader from which the gold is presumably discharged could be identified if it were not that specimens of entirely opposite character, embedded in distinct forms of quartz, were found lying side by side. Sometimes the gold is free from quartz, sometimes embedded in greenstone, sometimes combined both with greenstone and quartz, sometimes with quartz alone. Often it is as fine as flour; again it will range from 'colours' to nuggets of several ounces. It may be worth only £2, 18s. per ounce; it may, and does, assay £3, 18s. and £4. No rule can be laid down; and in one case at least the purchaser has one invariable price, which protects him from much loss on the inferior samples, and leaves an ample margin of profit on

the better class. The best patches are got in ravines a few hundred feet in length, where a narrow gutter of two or three feet contains the payable gold. The mouth is not unusually poor; the extreme head of the ravine is also worthless; but occasionally the gold is traced through the exposed slate right up to the conglomerate—in fact, to points where the beetling cliffs have covered the bed with such masses that the labour of removing them could not be paid by the gold won. In no instance has the discovery of gold in the conglomerate *in situ* been authenticated, though careless observers who have got gold in conglomerate *débris* may deny the assertion.

"In this region nature maintains a fitting solitude. The glaring cliffs drop down from a table-land where the cypress pine surges mournfully in the breeze, half-starved dingoes wake the echoes of the hills by their nightly serenades, and a few blacks roam from creek to creek and gorge to gorge, finding, in the innumerable caves into which the soft substance is excavated, safe harbour and concealment after a raid on the plains below. To this region must one come to see the fossieker in all his miserable state. Travelling in pairs, but usually working separately, the true gambusino of the north is found. Each boils his separate billy and provides his frugal fare; each pitches his solitary tent; each works when and how disposed; each roams the ravines adjacent in search of some hidden store; and only when an abundance of water and cradling dirt convenient points out the mutual benefit do the two combine and share the joint proceeds. Inducement for such a life is hard to find. Every pound of food has to be packed from fifty to a hundred miles. Salt meat is necessarily the sole form in which meat can be provided.

Day after day, week after week, the patient fossicker tries creek after creek, gully after gully, ravine after ravine, with the same result; the monotonous 'colour,' or, worse still, the occasional presence of a coarse speck, encouraging the delusion of better things. But allow unwonted success to have attended research. The dirt is payable, the site not more than a quarter of a mile from water, and, by unremitting toil, from two pennyweights to a rarely-attained millenium of an ounce a-day can be made. What is the *rationale* of proceeding? No sooner has a permanent camp been pitched than watchful eyes have marked the smoke. Every movement from the camp is noted. Every dish of dirt has to be picked in a hollow admirably adapted to conceal approaching footsteps. Huge masses of rock hang within spear's throw of the unsuspecting miner. The hard and stony ground hides all vagrant tracks except to the most experienced. Every pound of dirt has to be borne on the back over spinifex, or through grasses shedding barbed seeds directly they are touched. It has to be washed beneath a glaring sun, aided by all kinds of winged tormentors; and hour by hour, nay, every second, there is the same uneasy consciousness that bloodthirsty and vengeful eyes are upon you, and that to relinquish your gun for a minute may cost you your life."

Such was the nature of the arduous unrewarded pursuits which the two companions carried on at this period. They had been nearly twelve months seeking their "fortune" in this manner, and what little gold they had succeeded in obtaining had melted away, along with a large portion of John's

slender capital, in providing rations and in replacing a couple of horses which had fallen victims to the spears of the aboriginals. Our hero about this time had undertaken a journey into the township to purchase a fresh stock of rations and necessary supplies, leaving his mate alone behind him in the desolate wilderness, whither their work had drawn them, to find him on his return (about ten days afterwards) prostrate, a victim to a severe attack of malarious fever. How miserably wretched everything looked. The fire had been out for nearly a week. The unfortunate man, utterly exhausted by the enervating disease, had been unable to procure a draught of water, after exhausting the quantity which had filled the bucket when he was first taken ill, and had been at least a couple of days tortured by excruciating thirst. Utterly debilitated, he had looked forward to nothing but death as a release to his sufferings, when the arrival of John again restored a spark of hope to his breast. Unable to move or speak, his eyes, dilated by illness to double their natural size, followed the form of his companion with a trustful look of confidence and affection, which revealed that the drooping spirit had once more taken root and was reviving. The next morning he was better, and some doses of fever mixture, together with his friend's society, restored the sick

man in a few days so far that he was able to sit up and partake of a little of "Liebig's extract,"—a preparation invaluable to those beyond the reach of fresh meat.

During the periodical attacks of delirium which accompanied the fever, Ned had spoken much of a creek beyond the mountains in which he felt sure a rich patch of gold was awaiting them, and which he begged John to join him in prospecting as soon as the weakness which at present prostrated him should allow them to move. West was at first inclined to treat these often-expressed wishes as the whimsical fancies of a sick man which would disappear with renewed health and vigour; but in this he was mistaken. Each day the desire grew stronger in the now convalescent patient; and as the spot in which they were then working offered no great inducement for them to prolong their stay, they started, making towards the distant range of high hills, which were visible from the pallet where Ned had lain during so many weary days alone in his despair and misery.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PROSPECTING—THE BOWERS OF THE BOWER-BIRD—DANGERS—NEMESIS.

On all diggings there is a class of men who, impatient of steady, constant labour, devote themselves to the exploring of hitherto unworked and untrodden ground. These men are distinguished by the name of "Prospectors," and to their indefatigable energy and experienced skill has been due, in many cases, the opening up of new and valuable auriferous tracts. Among these men are to be met some of the most intelligent and brave of the hardy miners of the north, and very frequently they earn but a poor reward for the perils and hardships which they undergo. Too often it happens that they act the jackal's share in pointing out the prey to the lion "population," and that in the rush which follows they come off but second best, notwithstanding the regulations of the gold-fields, by which the discoverers of a new and payable field are entitled to a certain reward, sometimes in money, and at others in extended claims, or both, according

to the ideas of the Government which at the time may be in power. These prospectors go in well-equipped parties of from three to six, horsed, armed, and provisioned at their own expense, and make flying tours over a vast extent of territory, working a day here, another there, settling for a fortnight at times in one place, and again travelling without intermission for weeks over unlikely-looking ground. Supposing them to have been successful in discovering a tract containing, to the best of their belief, payable gold, it is required of them, in order to obtain the Government reward and protection for the area chosen by them to be worked on their own account, that they shall, on coming in, make a full report to the Gold Commissioner nearest to the spot, whose duty it is at once to start back with them, to examine and report on the field for Government information. An immense number of eager diggers follow the return party, all flushed with the hopes of gain. Should these prove fallacious, and the workings be found poor, an excitement more or less tumultuous generally succeeds, and the unreasoning and disappointed crowd usually turn their thoughts towards hanging, or at least lynching, the unfortunate prospectors, who in all probability have been the greatest losers by the transaction themselves.

Other prospectors there are of a less ambitious

nature. They have no desire that their names shall descend to posterity in connection with their discoveries. They are secret and cautious. They confine their explorations within a circle of from fifty to a hundred miles outside the known area of the diggings, and mostly go in pairs. Should they chance to alight upon a payable creek, gully, or ravine, they set to work quietly to extract as much of the precious metal as possible from the soil before they can be discovered, preferring the chance of what they can get to the questionable benefit of a Government reward, with its contingent annoyances. Sometimes it happens that a few of the roughs and horse thieves, of whom there are always plenty about every diggings township, make up a party to prospect, in the hope of alighting upon some easily-worked heavy deposit of gold, or discovering a camp of men who have done so, and thus sharing cheaply in the benefits resulting from their skill and research. It does not take this class of prospectors long to equip themselves. They are acquainted with the whereabouts of almost every horse of any value on the field. Their nights are spent in driving them away and hiding them, and their days in bringing them back after a sufficiently large reward has been offered by the anxious owners. They easily get a supply of rations on credit from the various storekeepers, who, fearful of their pos-

sible resentment, are glad to get rid of them for a time on any terms. Horses begin to disappear, and all of a sudden the little township is forsaken temporarily by a number of scoundrels who have infested it, and made honest men uneasy about their property. It is impossible to follow them: they are thorough bushmen, and have taken every precaution against pursuit. The white constables, stiff and slow in their movements, are nowhere beside the quick-witted rogues who, once mounted, defy the clumsy horsemen of the law. Now and again reports are brought into camp about them by men who have seen them in various places, and a general uneasiness as to horseflesh and security of property prevails.

John West and Ned were prospectors of the secret and cautious class. Our hero could not bear the idea of working among the common herd for a bare livelihood. He had set his all upon the hazard of the die, and he felt that on working on the outside there was a chance which possibly might turn up trumps some day. He was, in fact, leading a gambler's existence; and the expedition on which they had just started, although Quixotic from many points of view, afforded them quite as good an opening for success as any other they might undertake. In this spirit he pursued his way, quietly listening to, though without participating in, the sanguine prophecies of his com-

panion, who, since his attack of fever, appeared to have acquired a double stock of energy. In one or two places they came upon ravines which gave promise of returning a substantial and easy reward for labour, and John began to doubt whether it was wise in him to pass them unheeded. Some one might drop on their tracks, and in following them, discover and profit by their folly and neglect. Any suggestion, however, to halt for a few days produced such an agony of impatience and annoyance, that John, although feeling strongly convinced of the folly of doing so, never failed each time to give way to the imploring entreaties of his comrade, whose great desire appeared to be to get on the other side of the mountains, on whose dark and rugged tops his eyes had dwelt during his recent extremity. Each day as they approached the great range Ned grew more and more silent; and John sometimes felt inclined to think that his mind had become somewhat deranged by his sufferings. With difficulty they surmounted the dark, cypress-clothed, conglomerate hills, and with equal difficulty descended the precipitous rocks on the other side, into a savage, barren, narrow valley, hemmed in between two steep mountain-spurs, the sides of which were covered with stunted palms, grass, trees, and coarse high fern grass. Making their way slowly, they at last emerged upon the half-dried channel

of a creek, crossed in places by great bars of slate. The bent and twisted ti-tree and river-oak saplings reveal the fierce character of the mountain torrent during the rainy season. At present its bed is but a glaring, burning ribbon, relieved at intervals by a deep water-hole, which some strong eddy has scooped out of the sandy bed. The surface of the country is strewn with quartz pebbles and boulders; and although not as auriferous looking as some of the places they have passed by, is nevertheless promising.

As they prepare to cross the creek, their attention is attracted by a neat little structure under a few bushes close to them. John recognises it at once, but Ned has never seen one before. It is the bower of the bower-bird. It is a most interesting little building, and Ned dismounts to examine it. In length it is about two feet. It is open at either end. The walls are composed of small twigs beautifully and carefully interlaced, and are three or four inches thick, rising, and becoming gradually thinner as they do, until they almost meet where they arch overhead. The width of the little summer-house is about a foot. It is not a nest for breeding purposes, but simply a playground — a bower for social intercourse; and here a number of the skilful little architects meet together to amuse themselves. With the view of beautifying their retreat, the bower-birds have

collected a large quantity of white pebbles, snail shells, pieces of quartz, crystal, &c., which they have arranged in neat plots at either entrance, and also on the floor in the middle. Suddenly Ned, who has been kneeling down examining the wondrous little edifice, gives a great cry, and starting to his feet, rushes to one of the pack-horses, from the back of which he tears his pick, shovel, and tin dish, and hastening down to the creek, he commences scraping up the drift which has collected in one of the hollows of the slaty bar which crosses its bed. In another instant he has swilled away the sand in a small pool on the rock close by, and is glaring dazedly upon at least an ounce of bright yellow gold at the bottom of his dish. John, who has remained sitting on his horse in a state of speechless surprise at the unaccountable behaviour of his mate, now dismounts and approaches him. Ned hears him not; he is still gazing stupidly on the yellow heap at the bottom of the dish, one glance at which reveals all to John. Without a word, as if stung by some insect, the bite of which compels frantic exertion, he has rushed to the horses and possessed himself of his implements, and in another instant is washing dish after dish of the golden sand, until he has quite a little heap beside him on a flat stone, and the sun is sinking low in the western sky. He looks up. Ned is hard at

work, and the horses are gone. A sudden exclamation to this effect breaks the spell which has bound them, and urged by the necessity of attending to their safety, they both arise and look about them. Their hearts are too full to speak. Their horses are discovered grazing a few hundred yards off, and mechanically the companions unsaddle their animals and fix the camp.

Once more they descend to the scene of their labours. They can hardly believe the evidence of their eyes. Again and again they wash dish after dish, with the same happy result, until darkness compels them to desist. As they sit in their tent after their frugal supper, examining the produce of their day's work, West, who can hardly realise yet that everything is not a dream, suddenly asks: "What made you so determined to prospect over on this side of the ranges, Ned?"

"I don't know," answered the other. "I can't account for it, but when I was lying on my bunk, slowly perishing with fever and thirst, I kept hearing a voice in my ears saying, 'Over the mountains there lies your luck,' until I felt convinced that, could I but once accomplish the journey, I would at last drop on the spot we have been seeking so long. The weaker I grew the stronger became the belief, and at last, with your return, the hope of gratifying the intense long

ing enabled me to cast sickness behind me. I had thoughts of nothing else. The voice kept ever sounding in my ears, 'Over the mountains,' and as we made our way here, I felt certain that step by step we were nearing our luck."

"But," said West, "what was it that made you try the creek so suddenly? It was a likely enough place, but we have tried hundreds of similar patches unsuccessfully."

"Well," returned Ned, "as I was examining the bower of those wonderful birds, and remarking their taste in laying out their little play-house just like human beings, I happened to take up some of the quartz pebbles which ornamented the entrances to the little wicker abode. *Each one, almost, had a few specks of gold in it.* I heard again the voice, 'Over the mountains there lies your luck,' and then I seized the shovel and dish. I knew I should find it; but it almost took my senses away for all that."

The two friends, excited by their good fortune, continued talking long into the night, and next morning daybreak found them once more working with furious ardour. Day by day the same work, varied with more or less success, caused the hours to pass with the swiftness of minutes, and the little chamois-leather bags were filled to bursting. The first week's work had produced upwards of 250 ounces of a very rich

sample of gold. The discovery of a rich ravine, debouching upon the river just above the slatey bar they had first set to work upon, proved of the utmost importance. If they could only work it out in quietness, they would have sufficient to satisfy themselves. It had always been a rule of the two comrades, as indeed it is of most diggers, to rest from their labours on the Sabbath; and in accordance with their usual practice, on the first Sunday after their discovery of the golden bar, they had, after resting during the forenoon, strolled out for a walk. Instinctively they bent their steps towards the neat little bower, to whose busy and tasteful builders they owed so much. There it was, a perfect marvel of ingenuity. As he stooped down to examine the shells and quartz collected with so much care and labour, it occurred to John that, where the quartz specimens were found, others were to be met with. The character of the quartz bore a great resemblance to that of much lying on the ground and filling the mountain gullies around. Breaking the quartz boulders here and there, they soon collected a heap of specimens of a similar character, all indicating that the main reef or vein from which they had been hurled, or from which the gradual process of denudation had washed them, lay at no great distance. Following these evidences up the mountain slope for about a couple of hundred yards,

they came upon a large "blow" or outcrop of quartz, sticking out of the earth, over the surface of which were scattered detached blocks of the same substance. Gold was everywhere embedded in greater or less quantities on the matrix, and valuable specimens were picked up by the friends as they casually explored the ground about.

Returning next morning to the reef, they collected and bagged up the most valuable pieces which they could find, and betook themselves once more to their work in the ravine, determining to return, if spared, at some future period, with the necessary tools and proper appliances for the opening up of the great vein. Nearly three weeks had been passed in uninterrupted labour, and the results of their work had assumed very considerable proportions, when the prospectors were disagreeably disturbed one morning by the presence of natives. They had hitherto been remarkably fortunate in escaping the notice of the denizens of the wilds in which they lived; but on this occasion they received a no less startling than unwelcome notice of trespass in the shape of a spear, which, hurled from behind a few bushes, at a distance of about eighty yards, passed within an ace of Ned's head, as he brought up a bucket of water from the water-hole below the camp. A bullet instantly fired at the treacherous foe, and which struck a tree close to him, causing large pieces

of bark to fly off it, had the effect of making him beat a hasty retreat, ducking his head in the most ludicrous way as the reverberations of the report among the ranges assailed him on every side. From this time forward, however, they had no rest; a horrible uncertainty kept them ever on the watch; and even when reassured to a certain extent by a complete cessation of all annoyance for a couple of days, engendering the hope that their bloodthirsty enemies had left the vicinity of their camp, a *coey* on the mountains, answered in the distance by two or three more, would again awaken the harassing dread which continually haunted them.

The experience of native habits which John had acquired during his squatting life became very useful in this emergency, and enabled them to take measures which had the effect of keeping the blacks at a distance, and of estimating properly their chances of safety and danger. As a matter of precaution, a hole had been dug in the floor of the tent, in which all their treasure had been stowed away, and each night the day's earnings were secretly added to the hoard. Digging became a much more arduous task than formerly. The necessity for being constantly on guard obliged each to take it in turns to act as sentry, day and night,—besides which, their horses proved a source of incessant trouble. Some days before the

appearance of the blacks, one of the animals, a restless wandering mare, had strayed away, leading the others with her, and at about six miles' distance had dropped across a patch of young burnt feed, which had ever since remained an irresistible attraction to them. No means adopted to keep them in the neighbourhood of the camp having the desired effect, the searching for them on foot became a really dangerous duty, it being highly imperative that one man should remain to guard the household gods. On discussing their position one evening, after a peculiarly distressing day, and finding that their horses had once more cleared out, the comrades came reluctantly to the conclusion that they could no longer remain in their camp with any degree of safety. The natives might at any moment take it into their heads to spear their horses, in which case they would have but a slender chance of ever reaching civilisation; or an accidental spear might, causing the death of one of themselves, render the escape of the other next to an impossibility. All things considered, then, they resolved to be contented with what gold they had already secured, and to return as soon as possible, in order to open up the quartz reef, which they regarded as the most valuable of their discoveries. Next morning, therefore, Ned, whose turn it was for that duty, started in order to recover the

truant nags, leaving John behind him to guard the camp. Down the rocky creek he took his way, his bridle on his left arm, and his carbine over his shoulder, keeping a sharp look-out for natives. He came to the spot where the horses usually ran; but this time they were not to be seen, although the tracks and manure indicated that they could not have left the place long before. Up and down he searched unsuccessfully, and at length, following the creek some distance down into unknown ground, came upon the junction of a small tributary with it. Fagged and vexed with tramping so many miles over a broken, grass-seedy country, he seated himself to rest for a few minutes on a large granite boulder, but had hardly done so when the approach of a horseman from behind startled him.

"Good day," said the stranger, gruffly. "Prospecting?"

"Yes," returned Ned.

"So ham I. Camp hup the creek?"

"Yes," again replied Ned. "Seen any horses?"

"No," answered the new-comer shortly, turning his horse's head up the little creek which junctioned with the larger one near them.

"I'm looking for some horses," said Ned, "and I'm fairly knocked up over it. If you see any tracks up the way you're going, you might fire off your carbine to let me know, and I'll come up."

The man rode away, and Ned remained where he was, though without expecting much from his meeting with the horseman, who was evidently a surly-tempered man of few words. Ten minutes had scarcely elapsed, however, when the report of a rifle sounded up the little stream, followed at intervals by half-a-dozen others, and pushing hurriedly along, he caught sight of, and made his way to, his new acquaintance, who was sitting on his horse, on a little knoll some distance above the bank of the creek.

"Where are they?" eagerly inquired Ned, who saw no signs of the wanderers.

"I got two of the ——," returned the man, with a grim, self-satisfied sort of air.

"Where?" asked Ned, looking around. "I don't see any."

"There's one," replied the new prospector, pointing with his carbine to the still warm and bleeding body of a black man lying among the long grass beside him; "the other's in the creek. I came hacross them hunawares, hand 'ad the first hon 'is back hafore 'e know'd where 'e was, but this un giv' me a good deal of bother hafore I dropped 'im."

Ned had no great sympathy for the blacks; he had suffered too much from their enmity, and, if necessary, would not have hesitated in taking their lives in de-

fence of his own; but this cold-blooded procedure filled him with horror.

"Did they not attack you first?" he asked.

"They didn't get the slant this time. The —— wretches halways does when they can, hand I halways serves 'em same way. There's nothing I likes better nor shooting a good hold stinking buck nigger."

Ned looked at the speaker. There was something about him which recalled some vague recollection, some undefined misty memory of bygone times. He was mounted upon an exceedingly handsome chestnut, with a thorough-bred look, which bespoke pedigree and speed. His air and manner proclaimed him a self-reliant, determined man, unaccustomed to control; but a glance at the coarse round head, and repulsive animal features of the face, revealed the presence of the brutal type of mind of which they are the certain indications. Comment on the action would have been as imprudent as useless, so, with a short farewell, he once more started in pursuit of his stray property, not at all relishing the parting words of the black slayer, who shouted after him that he would look him up at his camp. He had not gone far when he fortunately fell in with the fresh tracks of horses, and shortly afterwards, coming upon the stragglers themselves, he started for the camp.

The announcement to John West that their whereabouts had been discovered was as unwelcome as startling, upsetting, as it necessarily did, all their previous arrangements. It had been their intention, after securing their gold, and providing the necessary tools required by them in quartz-mining, to proclaim the discovery of the golden region, and secure the advantages of the Government reward and protection. It was a simple plan, and one which could not have failed in obtaining for them every advantage they desired, provided that the knowledge of the auriferous country remained their own. It was not to be expected for a moment that any one with the smallest experience of digging could remain ignorant of the rich nature of the alluvial deposits; and it was equally natural to suppose that the new-comers would endeavour to be the first in announcing the find, and claiming the consequent advantages for themselves. On the other hand, it was just possible that a compromise might be effected, and that by the amalgamation of both parties, all might participate in the golden harvest.

What was to be done? Ned was strongly against having any connection with the bad-featured stranger, for whom he had imbibed a strong dislike. The question was argued in all its bearings by the excited comrades, whose agitation was by no means allayed on

seeing a couple of horsemen, with a spare horse or two, arrive about sundown, and proceed to erect a small tent a couple of hundred yards distant from their own. Uneasily after supper they lay for a couple of hours revolving what plan to adopt under the circumstances. Night had again drawn her dark veil across the dismal gloomy territory, upon whose silence the noisy bustle and activity of a practical, self-seeking, struggling world was about to break.

"I'm uneasy about this gold, Ned," said West. "I think we ought to set to work and bag it up properly, so that we can strike camp and be off the moment we choose."

"I think so, too," returned Ned. "The sooner we have it wrapped up the better. I wouldn't like that ugly-looking fellow I came upon to-day to get a look at it."

"Well," proposed John, "let us start to work at once. We can't have a much quieter time."

In a few minutes the precious store was brought forth from its hiding-place, and lay displayed upon the large piece of strong canvas which was intended to envelop it. A noble sight it was, and deeply it stirred the emotions of the men, whose manifold sufferings and labours it but inadequately represented. Silently they gazed for a time, recognising, as they did so, many a well-known piece of coarse metal which

had rejoiced their eyes in the finding. Heaving an involuntary sigh, West broke the silence.

"What was that fellow like you met this morning, Ned?"

His companion was about to reply when a step was heard outside the tent, and pulling aside the flap the man himself appeared.

"Hi say, mates, you 'ave a nice little 'eap of the right sort there," he remarked, directing a burning look of cupidity towards the yellow pile on the canvas.

Springing to his feet, and grasping his loaded carbine, with jealous rage depicted in his features, John shouted, "Stand back! What do you want?"

"Oh, nothink," said the intruder; "honly I com'd hon a visit."

"Then," sternly rejoined the young man, by whose side Ned now stood, weapon in hand, "back you go to your own camp. If I catch you about mine after nightfall, I'll drive daylight through you. Those are my rules. Away you go."

Cursing deeply, the surprised and discomfited visitor slunk back to his quarters, the friends watching his retiring figure through the trees by the light of the now rising moon.

"Ned," said West, "that man will never rest until he becomes possessed of the gold there by some means or other, if possible. He's a more dangerous enemy

than any black fellow among these ranges. I knew it the moment I saw his eyes fixed on the canvas. I don't know how it is," he continued, "but the sight of him set my blood boiling within me. I seem to know his devil's face somehow."

"So do I," returned Ned; "but I can't think where I saw it."

"Well, no matter; there's but one thing to do now," replied John, whose decision always rose to meet any emergency. "We must endeavour to get away from here to-night, unawares to that fellow. We'll make up the gold and pack the horses (it's lucky you got them to-day), and start back the way we came. We've moonlight; and I'll defy them, or any one else, to track us over the rocky road we made our way here by, without a blackboy, and then they'd have no easy job."

Armed with his carbine, our hero kept careful watch, while his companion hastily completed the necessary preparations, and by a couple of hours after midnight they had started, leaving the tent standing and a good fire burning beside it, to deceive their neighbours. Slowly but steadily they made their way over the stony precipitous mountains, and only halted for a short time next morning in order to partake of a hasty meal. Daylight enabled the travellers to continue their journey with greater comfort, but their rate of speed was much reduced, owing to more than one of their

horses having torn off their shoes in the rocky conglomerate defiles. They camped that night, feeling tolerably secure, from the distance accomplished and the difficult nature of the country they had passed over, taking, nevertheless, the precaution of keeping watch; and three days more brought them by mid-day to a little permanent mining camp, where, for the first time since the night of their flight, they experienced a thorough feeling of safety.

With the absence of the sense of danger, and the return of confidence, a suspicion began to creep over John that perhaps he had been too hasty in his conclusions. How absurd it would look should it turn out, after all, that the man was a well-known character, and as honest as himself! He felt ashamed almost of his behaviour, and was taxing himself with a want of coolness, when Ned, who had been getting the horses shod at the forge, came up, almost breathlessly excited.

"Anything wrong?" asked John.

"Only this," answered his mate: "I saw that fellow who found us out over the mountains, a few minutes ago."

"Are you certain, Ned?" inquired John, all his old suspicion flooding on him in a moment.

"Quite sure," returned he. "I had been speaking to an old acquaintance, and on returning to the forge I saw him for an instant, talking to one of the men. I could

not be mistaken about the face. The moment I entered he went out the back way, and although I followed him instantly, I could not see which road he took."

"Did you ask at the smithy about him?"

"Yes," said Ned; "but nobody knew. All they could tell me was that he inquired when we intended starting."

"I'm more certain than ever that fellow is after our gold," remarked John. "I wish we had it in the Commissioner's strong box. Are the horses finished?"

"Very nearly."

"Well," replied John, "wait here. I'll go up and fetch them, and perhaps I may get a sight of him up at the camp."

He made his way to the forge and got his animals, but no further information could he glean on the subject which disturbed him. As he left the smithy deep in thought, leading the horses along, the loud hearty "Good evening, mate," of a couple of horsemen awoke him from his meditations. The speakers were a couple of burly, bearded miners, their long Californian hats nearly covering their features from view. Each man was leading a spare horse, packed with a small compact swag, and both, it could be seen at a glance, were on their road into town. At first sight John failed to remember under what circumstances he had seen the men before; but at last it flashed upon him that these

were the miners who had occupied their deserted ground on the first camp they had settled on, and who had started sinking a shaft in their fireplace for luck.

"Holloa!" he cried, his interest becoming awakened. "Is that you? What luck had you with that old claim of ours?"

"Well," returned one of the diggers, "Bill here and me have been mates this many a year, but taking up that old ground was the best day's work ever we done together. We took a couple of hundred ounces out of that fireplace, and ever after we couldn't go wrong somehow. They've given us the name of the 'lucky mates.'"

"Many's the time," broke in the other, "Tom here and me said we wished we could come across you and your mate, in case as how we could give you a bit of a lift, if so be as you wanted it, for we've had plenty ever since."

John thanked the speaker heartily, and informed him that he had done well himself, and was even now on his road to the Commissioner's camp with some gold.

"We are going there ourselves," replied his friends; "we might as well go together. Where's your camp?"

This accession to their strength was a most welcome addition to our prospectors, whose story was listened to with great interest by the off-handed, honest-hearted diggers.

The night passed by quietly, and next morning the travellers prepared to accomplish the remaining distance which lay between them and their destination.

A considerable portion of the road wound through narrow, rocky defiles, hemmed in betwixt precipitous cliffs, and was infested by a tribe of savages whose treacherous ferocity had procured for it a reputation of the very worst description. Many a time the spears of the ambuscaded natives had been dyed red in the heart's blood of the gold-loving invaders of their sterile domains; and notwithstanding all the exertions of the native police stationed in the vicinity, the spot maintained its evil character. The united party, keeping a careful look-out around them, had almost reached the most intricate portion of the stony pass in safety, when wild yells some distance ahead, together with a shot and the shrieks of a white man's voice, warned them that once more the vindictive Myalls were engaged in their bloody work. Drawing their firearms, they pushed rapidly forward, and turning a corner, saw, not far in front of them, a white man rapidly bounding down the rocks on one side of the road, closely pursued by three or four totally naked aboriginals, who, with terrific yells, hurled their spears at their shrieking victim. Several more of the tribe were congregated on a rock a little higher up, clamorously engaged over some object on the

ground. The unexpected arrival of the new-comers, together with half-a-dozen well-directed bullets, had the instant effect of dispersing the natives, of whom in less than a minute there was not a vestige to be seen.

Leaving Ned and one of their diggings friends to look after the man to whose rescue they had so opportunely come, and who now lay in a fainting condition on the ground, John, with the other, climbed towards the rocky shelf where they had noticed the group of aboriginals collected. A fearful object met their eyes. It was the grinning head of him whose lust of gold had impelled him to pursue the owners of the golden heap which had excited his covetousness on the distant creek, and who had evidently selected this difficult gorge with a view of "sticking up" and robbing them, only to fall a prey to the countrymen of the beings he had himself slaughtered with so little compunction. As John West gazed on the dreadful sight before him, awe-struck at the terrible and swift retribution which had overtaken the hardened villain in the midst of his crimes, the likeness which had so puzzled him in life became explained, and it was with a feeling of the deepest horror that he recognised in the pale and death-stricken face the battered, lowering visage of Bill Cane, the murderer of M'Duff. A thick beard, hiding the lower part of his face, had

concealed his identity, and produced the alteration which had hitherto proved an effectual disguise. The mutilated trunk lay some distance off, torn and hacked by blunt weapons, and in spite of the short time at their disposal, the eager cannibals had carried away several portions of the body, for what purpose there was but little doubt. Descending to their companions, they found them engaged in doing what they could for the relief of the unhappy being, who recovered from one fainting fit merely to fall into another. The first glance assured John that it was the miserable Ralf, but so changed, so cadaverous and wretched looking, that Ned, who had not seen him for several years, entirely failed to remember him.

A spear head had penetrated his shoulder, but beyond that no wound could be discovered to account for his prostration. Suddenly, as if recalled by the sound of John West's voice, the eyes of the wounded man opened slowly, and fixing them steadily on the speaker, he seemed animated by a desire to say something. Bending down, West approached his ear to the lips of the miserable creature, and barely distinguished the whisper, "I—did not—want to—kill him," when the relaxed jaw and a rattle in the throat announced that he had passed away,—M'Duff's murder being evidently the subject of his thoughts in this solemn hour. The sudden terror had been too

much for him. His enfeebled constitution was unable to bear up against the effects of the shock; and in death, as in life, the brothers in guilt remained unparted.

This awful climax to the lawless lives of the slain men impressed the onlookers greatly, and all felt relieved when the arrival of a body of police, who had been sent for, allowed them to leave the blood-stained pass. But little notice was taken of the event by the public in general. Murder by blacks was too common an occurrence to cause much surprise; and the report of the new field discovered by John West and his mate, together with the amount of gold brought in by them, created an excitement before which everything else paled in interest; and but few days elapsed when, accompanied by the principal Government authorities, and followed by an immense concourse of miners, they returned to the scene of their successful labours.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EXPLAINS MATTERS IN GENERAL—CONCLUSION.

WILLY FITZGERALD, we have already mentioned, returned to Ungahrun a sadder man than he had left it, and not less sad than puzzled by the events which had occurred around him. He could not account for Ruth's agitation, or for the abrupt and decisive manner with which she had intimated her refusal of his offer. Even now he could scarcely realise that his hopes were for ever at end. He had made so certain of success that the probability of rejection never suggested itself to him. Could it really be the case? He had surely committed some blunder unawares,—perhaps he had offended her womanly sensibilities in some stupid way. He was so utterly deficient in tact. What else could it have been? Then the recollection of her calm, determined manner would rise, bringing with it a sense of hopelessness, and also a touch of bitter indignation and resentment, for poor Fitzgerald had undoubtedly loved honestly and sin-

cerely; and rejection of love is a sore trial to bear. What could have been the matter, too, with John West? He seemed to have gone out of his senses. Everything was at sixes and sevens. He would, however, find his friend at home, and discover that part of the business.

In this, as we know, he was mistaken; and the short note which Blucher handed to him explained nothing; nor could the blackboy, who was as perplexed as himself at his master's disappearance, throw much light on the subject. What could have made him behave in so wild and extraordinary a manner on meeting them the day before? Was it possible—and he started as he remembered Ruth's emotion—that she could have been the cause of the remarkable excitement which had disturbed him? Had there been anything between them previously? The question threw a new light over everything,—the place of meeting,—the kneeling posture,—everything seemed to point to the fact: and then his sudden departure.

It accounted for all.

But did Ruth love him? Ah! that question pricked him with sudden sharp pain. It was true that she had never given himself any great encouragement; and he remembered feeling at a loss for a reason why she should at times appear anxious to avoid his company. He had consoled himself at the time by at-

tributing it to her woman's coquetry, and it had piqued his fancy rather than otherwise. What a blind fool he had been! Gradually it dawned on him that he had been inhabiting a fool's paradise; and the more he thought on it, the wider his eyes opened to the truth, and the surer grew the conviction that his rejection was final. His reflections, however, did him good on the whole, for love cannot exist unless it has love to feed upon; and the knowledge that he had wasted his affection on one whose thoughts were bound up in another was as gall and wormwood to his self-love.

Ruth, the unwilling cause of his misery, was by no means very happy herself. She was not at all proud of her conquest. It only added to her embarrassments. She was troubled about her step-father, and troubled about John. Each mail brought worse news than the last from Europe; and in proportion as wool fell in value, so did the sheep which produced it. Daily Mr Cosgrove's affairs grew more hopelessly involved, and his health worse. Who could have foreseen a few years ago that such a change could have come over the strong, selfish, hard man of the world? The terrible disappointment which his son's career had wrought had given the first great stroke, and from that date forth he had gradually begun to sink. The question of what she should do in the event of his death

not infrequently presented itself to Ruth's dismayed mind with appalling intensity. The Berkeleys, it is true, were her blood relations, but they had been so incensed with her election to reside with her step-father, that she could hope for but little sympathy from that quarter; and she knew not where else she could look to. As to John West, Ruth wept with vexation when she remembered the pained despairing expression which had swept over his features as he noticed Fitzgerald bending over her in the earnestness of his entreaty. She had longed to see him once more, and what had come of it? She knew somewhat of his struggling life, and how unwearyingly he had battled for success; and she trembled as she thought what utter despair might urge him to. She bore her troubles, nevertheless, as she had learned to do long ago, with outward calm. Whatever might have been the conflict and distress of her soul, no one knew it.

As for the Grays, they lived very much in the same humdrum style they had done since Bessie's marriage. The fall in sheep considerably affected the old squatter's income; but he had money put by, and owed no man anything, and hoped by strict economy to tide over the crisis which was ruining the money-borrowing sheep-owners all around. Phœbe had seen but little of either Ruth or Fitzgerald since the event which had so greatly disturbed the latter's equanimity;

for the former was too busy at home attending to her step-father's ailments, and the latter would rather have gone anywhere at this period than to Betyammo. His self-esteem had been wounded, and he fancied himself humiliated in the eyes of the world; and somehow he felt as if he could willingly have faced any one rather than Phœbe. She had come out of the struggles which had tried her so bitterly as gold comes from the fire. Her unselfish cheery little spirit arose from the burning flames like a Phœnix from the ashes. She had bravely done battle with herself; and although the old wounds rankled and bled afresh now and again, she went about her household duties with a somewhat unreasoning but fixed belief that whatever is is best, and that everything is ordered for the best, cheering and comforting her parents, and shedding happiness around her.

Stone and Bessie were very comfortable in their new home, and prosperity still smiled upon them. John's sudden disappearance had perplexed Stone exceedingly; and Bessie's mysterious nods and "I could if I woulds" served only to mystify him more. "Now, Bessie," he would say, "you're just like all the rest of your sex. I'm sure you think that some love affair is at the bottom of it; and how on earth was the fellow to fall in love? He hadn't the chance."

Then Bessie would nod her head more sagaciously

than ever, and her husband would give up the conundrum in despair. Ruth's rejection of Fitzgerald had by no means taken her by surprise, and, to tell the truth, she rather enjoyed the unexpected discomfiture of her old friend than otherwise. "It won't do him a bit of harm," she frequently told Charley. She was very fond of Ruth, and honoured her for her consistent character and her devotion to her now broken-down step-father, and would willingly have shown her all the kindness that lay in her power, but the distance was too far, and Ruth was tied down to her duties.

At last, however, a day came. On going into Mr Cosgrove's room one morning to inquire for him, Ruth discovered him sitting by the window-seat, a letter spread before him on his knees. The bed was unpressed. Startled, she approached, and found him a corpse! The candle by his side was burnt down into the socket. He had evidently been dead some hours. She had long looked forward to the possible occurrence of the event; but still the suddenness took her by surprise, and the shock was a severe one. She had never loved her step-father with the love which most children bestow so unconsciously on their parents; but never having known her own father, and having lived all her life with the dead man, who had treated her even in his successful days with a certain amount

of kindness, she could not but grieve for him. Where he was had been a home to her, and latterly he had softened and changed very much in his manner, as he became more infirm and dependent. The letter which had engrossed his latest moments was from his agents, Messrs Bond and Foreclose, and contained an intimation to the effect that the very unsatisfactory nature of his account had compelled them to take the disagreeable step of putting the estate into liquidation, and the dreaded announcement had probably killed him. Mr Gray, who was sent for, came over in the afternoon with Bessie, who had arrived on a visit the day before; and Phœbe and the sisters sympathised with the lonely girl, and carried her off to Betyammo, where Mrs Gray received her like a daughter, and where they made much of her, and consoled her with a hundred womanly little attentions and kindnesses. Mr Gray remained at Cambaranga, setting things in order; and Willy Fitzgerald, on hearing the news, mounted his horse and galloped over too, taking care not to go near the house until he ascertained that Ruth had gone away, after which he stayed, assisting Mr Gray in putting things to rights, and in endeavouring to do what they could. Poor Ruth! they soon saw they could not do much for her. The letter she had herself seen acquainted them with that. There was absolutely nothing left. Both men knew that Mr Cosgrove's affairs

had been long in a bad way, but neither had any idea of their being in so deplorable a state; and Willy Fitzgerald implored Mr Gray to accept a sum of money which would at least keep Ruth from present inconvenience. She might be allowed to believe it came from the estate,—"anything she liked," he urged, "provided she had it;" but old Mr Gray would not hear of such a thing.

"No, no, Fitzgerald, my boy. It won't do. It's like your generous nature; but it won't do — won't do. What if she ever came to know about it? No, no, it won't do. We'll see about her; she'll be all right, make your mind easy."

So having nothing more to do, Fitzgerald rode home, and busied himself about his work, and endeavoured to forget the existence of Ruth Bouverie.

When Bessie left Betyammo, she carried Ruth with her in spite of kind old Mr Gray's entreaties to make their house her home; and Ruth, determined not to eat the bread of idleness, put into execution a little scheme which she had evolved when staying with her friends. She qualified as a Government schoolteacher, and, through Stone's influence, got herself appointed to the little Government school in the township near his property; and on it she expended all her energies, riding in early in the morning, and returning again at sundown, to be a companion to

her friend, and gladden the household with her calm, sweet presence.

The public papers had apprised the colony at large of the important discovery which had been made in the shape of a new gold-field, and of the exceedingly rich prizes which some of the fortunate finders had drawn in the great lottery, but as yet John had kept silence about his share of good fortune. He stood almost alone. He had no one to rejoice with him except Stone and his wife,—and the Grays, perhaps; but they lived too near Ungahrun, and he did not care about going there. He could not bring himself as yet to face Ruth as another man's wife. His success had not come unalloyed by pain. How differently would he have felt a couple of years earlier! Then, perhaps, he might have had a chance against the rich man; but now—now that he cared comparatively little for success, everything went well with him. Ned and he received a considerable money reward from Government, as well as an unusually large area along the line of reef they had opened, and which from the first yielded rich stone. The gold-fields had proved a success; much alluvial gold had been taken out of the ravines and gullies, and many new quartz reefs had been found out, and were being worked. Machinery had been attracted to the field at an early stage, and one of

the results of the "crushings" was to fill the pockets of John and his mate over and over again. It was no doubt a great triumph for him, but on the whole he found it wearisome. The excitement was passed away, and he grew sick to death of the bustle and push around him. He sighed once more for the quiet bush-life, the lowing of the peaceful herd, the scent of the trampled sweet marjoram, and the blood-stirring gallop through the pleasant pasture-lands. The memory of former days grew irresistibly strong. There was nothing to detain him. Ned, who had become a person of considerable importance, undertook the management of the claim, so, saddling his horse one morning, he abruptly took leave of his friends, including the "lucky mates," whose favouring genius had enabled them to secure the adjacent ground to his own, and who were in a fair way to become independent for life, and started south for Brisbane, whence he made his way up to visit Stone and Bessie.

It was a soft pleasant evening, and Stone, who had been round the stables and outhouse buildings, superintending personally the feeding and watering of a number of choice young pedigree stock, came up and joined Bessie, as she stood on the grass-plot in front of the house, nursing her baby. It was her second child, and the first, a sturdy little man, ran to meet his father, clamouring for a ride upon his shoulder.

"Come along, then, old fellow," said Stone, lifting him up; "we'll go and meet Ruth, and you shall ride back with her."

As he opened the little garden-gate leading down the road he became aware of a horseman riding towards the house.

"Holloa, Bessie!" he remarked, calling attention to the fact, "we are going to have company to-night."

"Who can it be, I wonder?"

"No idea: some stranger, I suppose."

Nearer and nearer the horseman drew, until at last, springing from his horse amid loud exclamations of delight and surprise, John West stood beside them, shaking hands and answering a hundred questions.

Indeed, so busy and excited were they all, that no one noticed Ruth as she rode up, and, dismounting, entered the little gate, but Mr Stone, junior, who set up a shout of welcome.

"Do you know who this is?" inquired Bessie.

West turned round, and his heart stood almost still with the suddenness of the start.

"Don't you remember Ruth Bouverie?" said Stone, hastily.

"Ruth *Bouverie?*" returned John, with an unmistakable emphasis on the surname, and an ashen face, which caused that of the person in question to grow a deep crimson.

"Yes, of course; what else?" answered the settler, going over to his wife, who had been making a series of telegraphic signals to him, and accompanying her inside the house, leaving Ruth and John standing together on the grass-plot.

"What is the matter, Bessie?" asked the mystified man. "Anything wrong?"

"No," she said, laughing; "only you are such a great stupid, and can't see one inch before you. I always told you I knew more than I cared to tell about the cause of John's disappearance, didn't I?"

"Whew!" whistled Stone. "Oh! that's it, is it? and my lord here was jealous of Fitzgerald and——"

"Something of that sort," returned Bessie. "That's all right now, though, thank goodness; and mother says that Willy has got over the disappointment completely, and is more there than ever. Now you know, and just leave them to themselves. They'll be all right directly."

And apparently knowing, shrewd-witted Bessie was right, for that evening at supper John West's face wore a beaming look of happiness, such as had not lighted it for many a day, while Ruth, filled with sweet content, listened to the narrative of his adventures with mingled pity and amazement, weeping at the last tears of sorrow over the fate of the unhappy Ralf, with a sincere grief which was undeserved.

But little now remains to be told. Yielding to his inclinations, John West purchased a compact, well-grassed cattle station in a favourite part of the country, where, surrounded by pleasant neighbours, he literally lives under the shade of his own fig-tree, and drinks the juice of his own grape. Ruth, now his wife, moves about, imparting to everything a feminine grace and elegance, with a magical touch, which to her husband is simply marvellous; and as he rests his eye on her figure, and the fragrant blossoms of the flower-garden, which it is her special delight to tend, the recollection of days of unrewarded toil, and misery, and danger, fades away, as does an unsubstantial dream of the night before the brightness of the golden morning.

As already related, Fitzgerald recovered his soundness of heart, but not for long. His renewed intercourse with the Grays brought him once more into contact with Phœbe, and day by day he became more and more impressed with her charming character and sterling qualities, until at last, wondering how he could have been so blind as to prefer any one before her, he begged her to become his wife. For some months Phœbe held out, in order, as she said, to give him time to know his own mind, but eventually yielding to his repeated solicitations, she consented, and the new house at Ungahrun opened its doors to receive

a throng of rejoicing friends and neighbours, eager to welcome the advent of its new mistress.

Desmard is succeeding well as a squatter out west, his father having advanced a sufficient sum to purchase a share in what will, with time, become a valuable station.

Ned has developed into a machine owner, and bids fair to become one of the largest mining capitalists in the colony.

THE END.

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